

Prologue: Winds of Change

Daily Prophet 6/29

Potter's Ghost at Hogwarts?

Multitudes of students returning from Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry have reportedly sighted the ghost of the Boy-Who-Lived himself at school. Our boy savior, who perished tragically in a house fire four years ago is apparently haunting not only the halls, but also the classrooms, where he watches as the students who would have been his year-mates learn magic. Hogwarts is certainly known for its oddities, but this is one of the most unexpected. Headmaster Albus Dumbledore is yet to deny or confirm reports, and has so far refused to open Hogwarts for public viewings.

Daily Prophet 7/19

ESCAPE FROM AZKABAN

Sirius Black, a dangerous criminal thought to have been You-Know-Who's right hand man, has escaped from Azkaban. All are warned to be cautious. If you see him, or come across any clues to his location contact Aurors immediately.

Keep in mind that Black is extremely dangerous, and killed thirteen people with one curse the night he was caught.

Of course the fact that he escaped shows clearly enough that he is deadly, as he is the first to ever have managed it.

He likely learned very powerful dark magic from his master.

This reporter recommends that you stay inside after dark, and avoid places far from the public eye where Black might be lurking.

Peter Pettigrew, called Wormtail first by his friends and later by his master, looked up from his copy of the Daily Prophet feeling rather annoyed. Black, escaped from Azkaban! Not that he need fear that fool, of all people, of course not.

Black would be heading to Hogwarts to see Potter's ghost, obviously enough, and Peter would make sure the ministry was there waiting. Perhaps he'd go over himself to watch. He could sneak around easily enough, and they didn't know about Black's animagus form. Peter

wouldn't tell them either, if he had to explain they'd likely discover his own form, which he wasn't willing to risk.

Daily Prophet 8/27

Trouble Breaks out in Flourishes

While most people were shopping for books, or getting them signed by the illustrious Gilderoy Lockhart, a brawl broke out in Diagon Alley's thriving bookstore, Flourish and Blotts, between Mr. Arthen Weasley and Mr. Lucius Malfoy.

Both ministry workers, poverty stricken Arnold Weasley obviously resents Lucius for his success...

For more, see page 12.

Daily Prophet 8/27

Lockhart to Teach at Hogwarts!

Gilderoy Lockhart, defense against the dark arts expert, author

of numerous bestselling bookings, and five times winner of the most charming smile award announced at his book signing that he has consented to go to Hogwarts to bring his knowledge directly to the new generation.

The Defense Against the Dark Arts job, which many believe to be cursed, has proved quite a challenge for past applicants, who never manage to last more than a year. Last year's Professor, Quirrel, died tragically towards the end of the year. Lockhart, however, isn't worried.

"If there's any trouble, it'll be nothing I can't handle," state Lockhart in reply to inquiry's. There's no doubt about it: Hogwarts will be lucky to have him. Parents can feel all the safer about sending their kids to Hogwarts.

Harry Potter had no notion of what events were taking place in the wizarding world. He did not have a news subscription, or someone nearby who could tell him what

was going on.

In fact, he'd merely fallen back into his old routine: working at the small pub in town for most of the day, stealing what food he needed from houses nearby, as the one meal he got at the pub each day wasn't quite enough, and spending the rest of his time at the Riddle house.

It was surprisingly simple to fall back into this familiar schedule, he might almost have thought he'd merely dreamed his time at Hogwarts if it wasn't for the many "welcome back"s, and the small shard of

glass he'd found snagged in the raveled fabric of his shirt sleeve. The shard undoubtedly came from the mirror he'd broken. He avoided looking too closely at it, but kept it, all the same.

At last August drew to an end. Harry apparated to the sidewalk near Kings Cross Station, making sure to be invisible, and walked inside. The station was the same as it had been last time he'd visited. It was bustling with people. He floated past lines of stations at their platforms beneath the arched ceiling, until he finally came to the barrier between platforms nine and ten, and drifted through.

Glancing around, Harry quickly found the twins, and followed them into their compartment, still invisible.

"So, George, what trouble shall we get up to this year?" Fred asked his twin once the compartment door was shut.

"We'll think of something, Fred. Speaking of which, where do you think Harry is?"

"I'd put my bets on hanging around listening to your evil plotting." came Harry's voice, apparently from thin air.

"Harry! You prat!"

"Welcome back mate, you just saved us the trouble of figuring out how to cause a stir!"

"So, Harry, what's the plan?"

"I'll be attending Hogwarts this term. As an actual student."

"That'll do it. I'm suspecting some complicated back story to all this, but that can wait."

"So, Fred, what outrageous prank shall we pull while Harry's distracting the school?"

When the train pulled into Hogsmeade station, Harry followed Hagrid and the first years, which now included the Weasley twin's little sister,

Ginny. They were, of course, completely unaware of Harry's presence, for which he was grateful. Floating across a lake was something he hadn't expected to have to do, but he managed.

They were lead from the door by Professor McGonagall to a corridor not far from the Great Hall, and left there, told that she would be back for them in a few minutes.

Moments later several first years gasped as ghosts began to float in through the walls. These being were quite familiar with Harry, and had no difficulty detecting him despite his lack of visibility. Nick's face split into a grin, and the Bloody Barron was watching Harry intently.

A/N: Back once again. This was a rather odd segment, especially since such a large portion was Daily Prophet articles. As you can probably tell, next chapter will bring the sorting. It is a rather controversial aspect, but I promise that Harry's personality will not suddenly change because of it. I believe that he has characteristics of many houses, but the one I will put him in is the one I believe most likely given his past circumstances. Not to mention that it will provide extra plot/interactions that I've been setting up for some time now. So no panicking based on house, please. Bear with me on that. Can anyone guess where I'm planning to put him, and why I've set up relations the way I have so far? (I'm guess probably not, but you're welcome to try and surprise me.)

Prank suggestions are welcome, since with the twins I'm likely to continue needing ideas throughout the fic.

I was asked what happened to the stone. The answer is that I'm not telling. I'm not sure whether it will be important in the future or not yet, so I can't presently tell you.

What do people think of this chapter/prologue thing?

Chapter One: Designation

Professor McGonagall lead the first years into the Great Hall, and Harry followed closely behind. The sorting hat was set up on a stool. *Almost time.* Harry wondered idly if Fred and George would get in trouble for the ghost set-up last year. They would probably only be amused if they did. The twins in general found pranks to be worth any punishment they might receive, to the point where they liked getting credit for their pranks. Having gotten away with such a grand deception

for a year was bound to amuse them, especially now that the joke was out.

The sorting hat began to sing, as it did at the opening of each year.

“Welcome all now to Hogwarts,

where you will spend the year

learning all the wizardry

that we can teach you here.

Each of all the houses four

have strengths and weaknesses,

now I’ll sort you into the one

that’ll help you grow the best.

In loyal Hufflepuff you’ll find those

who are hardworking and fair,

If in Ravenclaw you look you’ll find

learning and wisdom there.

In Slytherin, the strategists, with
cunning and ambition, who'll reach
up for the highest stars
because they have vision.

In bold Gryffindor you'll find
those who still hold to chivalry,
the brave of heart will find it to
be where they ought to be.

Step up and set me on your head
I'll sort you one and all,
That you may be at home here,
as through years you grow tall."

After the applause had died down, Professor McGonagall unfurled a parchment which presumably held the names of the first years, and began calling out names.

Bunky, Karston was the first to be sorted, and the first to go to Gryffindor. 'Capper, Sage,' went to Slytherin, 'Creevey, Colin,' to Gryffindor, and 'Dorny, Joann' to Hufflepuff, and so it continued.

"Harper, Derek."

"SLYTHERIN!"

"Lovegood, Luna."

"RAVENCLAW!"

Harry had gone completely unnoticed so far, by the living at least. He was still 'invisible', and

while it was perfectly clear from his run-in with Voldemort at the end of last year that he could be detected, it was an unlikely thing in a large room with so many people around to distract each other. He waiting patiently, wondering exactly what would happen when the time came.

The list drew to a close, with 'Smith, Zacharias' sorted into Hufflepuff and 'Weasley, Ginevera' sorted into Gryffindor.

As Professor McGonagall started to walk towards the stool where the hat rested, Harry shifted to visibility and, standing firmly on the ground, called out to her.

"Professor!"

She spun around, looking startled.

"I don't want to be a bother, but I'm afraid I never got around to getting sorted last year. Would you mind if I tried on the hat now?"

"Of c-course not. Go right ahead, Harry."

He walked up to the hat as calmly as possible. The hall was filled with whispers. Removing the hat from the stool he sat down and placed it on his head.

"Hmm, what have we here..."

"Me."

"*Must* you state the obvious? Now, let me see. Not a bad mind, and not lacking in courage, either, but you have a thirst to prove yourself. And you really are, to a point, a survivor. Better be a SLYTHERIN!"

Removing the hat from his head, he found that the hall had fallen silent, a great contrast to when every other student had been sorted. Then a single person started to clap. He looked around. It was Hermione. Not much of a shock there. He'd saved her life last year. He smiled back at her. Then, to his surprise, the twins joined in.

"Way to bring shock and chaos, Harry!"

“Keep up the good work, mate!”

He rolled his eyes at them grinning, then walked over to the Slytherin table and sat down in an empty seat towards the end of the table next to the Bloody Baron, who was looking ridiculously smug.

Even after Dumbledore finished his ‘speech’ and food was laid out, Harry could feel eyes on him. He couldn’t help glancing around the hall a few times to check. Snape was glaring at him, as were Ron Weasley and Seamus Finnigan. Draco Malfoy was giving him occasional irritated, wary glances. They weren’t the only ones watching him, however. The hall seemed filled with the curious eyes of strangers.

Though Fred and George Weasley weren’t quite sure what to make of their companion-in-mischief’s sorting, they weren’t particularly concerned. In fact, at the moment, they were quite pleased with themselves. Harry’s sorting appearance and sorting had proved wonderful distraction, giving them the opportunity to test out one of their latest inventions. They were now eagerly awaiting the results. They weren’t disappointed.

Gilderoy Lockhart, the first person to help himself to one of the dishes of custard that had mysteriously appeared on the staff table before the rest of the food without anyone noticing, suddenly squawked and turned into a canary. It was an extremely strange looking canary, the feathers on its head curled to the point of being comical. Hundreds of eyes turned to stare in surprise. As he began to molt, Lockhart desperately attempted to pull out the feathers that covered his head, only to end up pulling out a handful of his own hair. The now fully-human Lockhart gave a screech of rage.

“What was it you were eating, Gilderoy?” the headmaster inquired gently.

“That.” Lockhart practically spat, gesturing angrily at the custard dish.

“Pass in here, please.”

Lockhart did so, and watched in shock as the headmaster, instead of using some form of advanced magic to discover the perpetrators, as he'd expected, preceded to dish himself a helping of the enchanted food.

Harry followed the Slytherin prefect down to the common room with the rest of his house in order to get the password. Entering the common room, he found Malfoy standing there, watching him.

"You're alive, Potter?" The tone was almost mocking, but there was a hint of wariness in his expression.

"Unlike you, Malfoy, I'm one of the privileged few who knew that all along."

With that he left the common room and headed for the blocked off secret passage way Fred and George had set up for him to sleep in last year. It wasn't as if he had a place in the dormitory yet, and he could wait until tomorrow to deal with his fellow students. The teachers, or perhaps just his head of house, would probably come looking for him, and he didn't feel like talking to them now.

Arriving in the Great Hall the next morning, Harry found the Barron had yet to arrive. He glanced over the table, and then walked over and sat down by one of the students he'd met briefly the year before.

"Hello. I'm Harry Potter," he began, holding out his hand.

The boy looked at him, and then around at the many whispering students who were watching Harry.

"I've no interest in joining, or associating with your fanclub, Potter," he replied scathingly.

Harry smirked slightly, and answered, "That makes two of us then."

The boy looked at Harry consideringly for a moment, then reached out and took his hand.

“Theodore Nott.”

Double potions with the Gryffindors was first, according to the schedule Snape had given Harry at breakfast, informing him that he'd be attending second year classes because “if you failed to learn or practice the necessary skills last year because you were too busy playing dress-up, it's your own fault.”

He was one of the last to enter the classroom, still in rather ragged muggle clothing rather than a uniform.

“Potter!” barked Snape as he entered the classroom. “You'll be assisting Longbottom, as usual.”

“I'd never presumed otherwise.”

He headed calmly over to take a seat next to Neville, who was watching him apprehensively.

“You're- you're really alive then?” Neville whispered.

“Yes, Neville. Come on, let's get set up for the potion.”

“And you're a *Slytherin*?”

“What, are you planning to start treating me like scum, just because I'm in a different house?”

“Of course not, but- how- you looked like a ghost!”

“Just a few tricks I picked up from repeated accidental magic, and a bit of help from the Weasley twins.”

Neville was staring at him. Apparently this explanation had not put him at ease whatsoever.

“What happened to you? After you disappeared from your relatives...”

“What?”

“Accidental magic? That never happens in good situations. And for it to have happened enough to start duplicating the effects... you can't have been having many pleasant times.”

“It doesn't matter, Neville.”

“Right. Guess we should get to work on the potion.” But Neville still looked vaguely concerned. Harry supposed it probably wasn't a bad thing to have a few people who trusted you and were overly sympathetic.

Transfiguration was next. He sat down in the seat by Theodore Nott. Tracey Davis, who he'd also met briefly the year before, took the seat on his other side.

“Mr. Potter, I'm assuming the reason you don't have school supplies with you is because you don't have any yet?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“I'll take you over to Diagon Alley to purchase some this evening, unless your head of house has made other plans?”

“No, Professor. But if you don't mind my asking, where do you expect me to get money to buy supplies?”

She stared at him for a moment. It was probably occurring to her more clearly than ever the type of situations he'd grown up in.

“Your parents left you plenty of money in a vault at Gringotts, the wizarding bank. We can stop there first.”

“Oh.” To say he was surprised at the moment would have been quite an understatement. To think, money of his own... he could buy his

own food, his own cloths... something warm, maybe a coat or a cloak,
his own wand. "Thanks, Professor."

Chapter Two: Learning to Speak Diagonally

“Ah, there you are, Mr. Potter. We just need to drop by Hagrid’s and then we’ll floo over to the Leaky Cauldron.”

Harry stared at her for a moment as if she’d grown an extra head. “Excuse me, but I don’t have the flu, and I’d highly prefer a cauldron that *doesn’t* leak. If that was some sort of strange wizarding saying, I’d appreciate an explanation.”

Professor McGonagall appeared to be trying not to laugh. “Actually, Mr. Potter, the Leaky Cauldron is a pub that has an entrance to Diagon Alley in the back, and floo powder is a form of wizarding travel, nothing to do with the illness. And we’re going to Hagrid’s because he’ll be coming with us. Since the summer’s over they’ll be less people around the shops, so Dumbledore and I thought it’d be best to have Hagrid along, just as a precaution, what with Sirius Black on the loose.”

Harry was by now looking vaguely annoyed. Deciding to just *not ask* why anyone would name any place “diagonally,” or technically “Diagon Alley,” he skipped straight to the question he suspected was most important. “And who, may I ask, is Sirius Black?”

McGonagall seemed to be caught off guard. She’d clearly expected him to know about whoever it was. “Black- Black is a murderer who broke out from Azkaban recently. He’s considered a threat to the point where the ministry is talking about bring dementors to guard Hogwarts.”

“That’s lovely. In fact, if I knew what ‘azkaban’ or ‘dementors’ were, it might even have been helpful.”

“Azkaban is a wizarding prison, and dementors are its guards. Come along, Mr. Potter. I’d like to arrive sometime this week.”

“Coming, Professor.”

"I'm sorry you weren't raised properly among wizards, we thought you'd be safe at your relatives..." she told him almost tenderly as they walked out the main doors.

Harry was quiet for a moment. "I wouldn't change it, even if I could."
Because my past is part of me.

When they arrived at Hagrid's they found that they weren't the first to arrive for a visit. Hermione Granger was sitting inside with a cup of tea.

"Good afternoon, Professor- Harry!" she exclaimed, catching sight of him.

"So I'm a Professor now, huh?"

Hermione mock glared at him for a moment, and then her face broke into a broad smile.

"It's good to see you... but- where were you? How could you just vanish like that? How was your summer? What are you and Professor McGonagall-"

"We're heading over to Diagon Alley to pick up some school supplies for Mr. Potter. We were just stopping by to get Hagrid."

"I'm ready, Professor. Sorry, must've lost track of the time."

"Harry, this is Hagrid."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Harry."

"Course you are. Pleased ta' meet you. Lily an' James son, alive and well."

Harry smiled and nodded coolly. The extremely large man with his wild beard and hair, and friendly eyes seemed mostly pleasant, but he really had little interest in the man's sentimentality over his parents.

"Not to interrupt or anything, but can I come?"

“Miss Granger, there really isn’t any reason for you to accompany us. You-”

“I haven’t seen Harry in *ages*. He’s a good friend of mine, and-”

“You knew, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“Last year. You knew all along, didn’t you, Miss Granger?”

Harry cut in, “Maybe we’ll tell you after we get back if you let her come along.”

Professor McGonagall looked from Harry to Hermione, and back, then sighed.

“Very well. You’ve been through a good deal, I might as well humor you.”

A soot-covered Harry tumbled haphazardly from the Leaky Cauldron’s fireplace. He hit his feet in seconds, due to reflexes built from years of running from Dudley and living on the streets. He shot Professor McGonagall a disgruntled look.

“Professor, I think you might have been wrong about floo powder being unrelated to feeling ill.”

“Scourgify!”

“Thanks, Professor.”

The fire flared up again, and Hermione stepped neatly out the fireplace. Harry glared at her.

“What?”

“Never mind, Miss Granger. Come along, both of you. Harry turned to follow Professor McGonagall, and then spun around upon hearing the

fire flare up again to see Hagrid standing there. Hagrid, who was far taller than the fireplace.

"How-? Oh never mind," muttered Harry.

Hermione chuckled, and he mock glared at her.

Leaving through the back door of the Leaky Cauldron, they found themselves in a rather empty yard with a brick wall on the border.

Professor McGonagall approached the wall, and proceeded to tap several of the bricks with her wand. The wall began to shift, creating a doorway into what Harry supposed must be Diagon Alley. He, Hermione, and Hagrid followed McGonagall's lead and stepped through.

Though Diagon Alley was in many ways not all that different from a muggle-run area, the shop names and products on display were very different, and probably would have been rather mind boggling if not for the time Harry had already spent at Hogwarts. He had only a few moments to glance around, however, before they turned left and enter a large marble building. *Gringotts*.

Harry read through the rhyme on the door. *Enter stranger, but take head...* It was a warning to thieves. It didn't matter, really. For once he was going to fetch valuables that belonged to him. Of course he'd stolen more food than money, but food was valuable as well. He couldn't help feeling a bit uneasy, walking into such a secure bank, perfectly visible and unprepared for whatever might be waiting inside.

A very cheerful Harry and Hermione followed McGonagall and Hagrid out of Gringotts, having greatly enjoyed the cart ride down to the vaults. Hagrid had opted to wait for them in the lobby, instead of coming down with them, as apparently the cart rides made him sick.

Harry now had a bag full of gold coins, apparently called "galleons," with which to purchase school supplies, which to Harry made things seem rather surreal.

“Alright, now that we’re all together, here’s the plan,” began McGonagall once they were all outside. “I’ll get the standard supplies, and the two of you will go with Hagrid to pick out robes and a wand. Make sure to stay with them at all times, Hagrid.”

“But Professor, Flourish and Blotts-”

“We’ll meet up at the Leaky Cauldron in an hour. You can do whatever the three of you can agree on in the time you have left over, if any.”

“Yes, Professor.”

The trip to Madam Malkins was rather uneventful, though Harry found being measured, and having cloth draped over him, pinned, and cut to be a rather odd experience. Ollivanders, the wand shop, turned out to be rather strange.

The store was quiet, besides the ringing of a small bell on the door that echoes softly as they walked in, and their own footsteps. It was slightly dusty, and dimly lit, adding to the strange mood of the place.

“Ah,” a soft voice murmured, “Mr. Potter, I’ve been-”

A man with white hair and piercing silver eyes had stepped into view. He was now wearing a slight frown, and blinking several times purposefully.

“I haven’t been expecting you at all. What on earth are you doing here?”

Hermione chuckled. Ollivander looked distinctly put out.

“Wand shopping,” Harry replied calmly.

“I meant- oh never mind. Hold out your wand hand.”

Harry held out his right hand, and blinked in surprise as a tape measure floated over and began to measure him. And measure. And

measure. Ollivander finally told it to stop- when it had started measuring the distance between his nostrils. Harry highly doubted all this was necessary. Hermione looked amused.

It took a great deal longer to find a wand. Finally, when Ollivander handed him an eleven inch, phoenix feather and holly wand, a feeling of warmth grew in his fingers, and as he gave it a wave, a flurry of red and gold sparks shot from the tip.

"Curious," muttered Ollivander.

"What?"

"That phoenix whose feather is in your wand gave me another feather, just one other. It curious that wand should chose you, when its brother gave you that scar. We can expect great things from you, Mr. Potter. After all-

"Shut up," snapped Harry, shoving a handful of galleons into the man's hands and striding out the door. Ollivander was starting to get on his nerves.

"We'll have to research that," commented Hermione as they walked with Hagrid back towards the Leaky Cauldron.

"Research what?"

"Brother wands. It might be important."

"Alright. Be sure to tell me what you find."

"Excuse me?"

"I'll have to do a lot of studying on regular subjects to make sure I'm up to second-year level, 'Mione."

"Oh, right, I hadn't thought of that. Of course I'll tell you whatever I find."

“Thanks, I really appreciate it.” And he really appreciated her lack of cunning. He was already up to date on everything, but she didn’t need to know that...

Harry was the first to enter Hogwarts. He was sighted right away by Snape, who was walking by.

“Potter, out after hours, are you? That’ll be a week of detention and-”

“He’s with me, Severus,” cut in McGonagall, who’d walked through the main doors shortly after Harry.

“Fine. Why don’t you escort him to his dorm, then, lest he find his way elsewhere.”

“I will, since you’re proving incompetent as head of house. Hagrid, could you escort Miss Granger to Gryffindor tower? Come along, Mr. Potter.”

Harry followed her, leaving a furious Severus Snape behind.

“Potter, what are *you* doing here?” Draco Malfoy snapped as Harry entered the dorm.

“He’s in this house as well, incase you hadn’t noticed. About time you got here, Harry. Your bed’s over here, by the way,” said Theodore Nott from farther into the room.

“Thanks, Theodore,” Harry replied, and walked by Malfoy, smirking.

Chapter Three: Alliances and pixie-phobia

Harry was the first to awaken the next morning. Years of needing to be aware, and of sleep being not a luxury, but a necessity made a difference. In a room full of people, especially, these reflexes came to full force. He was glad to have woken. He wouldn't want to be asleep in a room while Malfoy was in it, awake, with things as they were at present. He lingered in the common room looking through his spell books until Theodore Nott arrived, and then went down to breakfast, Tracey Davis following and taking a seat across the table.

It was to be Herbology with the Ravenclaws in the morning, and then Defense Against the Dark Arts that afternoon. Harry and Theodore were joined at their table by Tracey, as well as two Ravenclaws who hadn't been quick enough to grab seats elsewhere.

"Mind telling us what you're doing following us around?" Nott hissed at the Slytherin girl.

"Following you around, as you said."

He was now looking rather irritated

"And *why* are you doing so?"

"What else would I be doing?"

"Annoying *them* perhaps?" Theodore gestured towards the table where Pansy Parkinson, Millicent Bulstrode, and Daphne Greengrass were seated.

Tracey made a face.

"How about *not*, Nott. They may have their uses, but Parkinson rather likes to fancy herself in charge, and I don't particularly feel like humoring her, no matter what the advantages, especially with other possibilities available. And don't tell me you don't see the benefits in alliances, Nott. You're here too.

“Earmuffs!” Harry snapped abruptly to the two of them.

“What?”

But Harry had already put on a pair. Tracey quickly followed his example. Theodore, being the last one in the class, behind even Professor Sprout in grabbing a pair, got stuck with fuzzy pink earmuffs. He spent most of the demonstration glaring at a smirking Tracey.

Luckily Harry had paid attention to the demonstration, and both Ravensclaws knew what they were doing, so the table’s occupants all managed to re-pot their mandrakes successfully.

Heading to Defense with his classmates, Harry’s expectations were admittedly low. Lockhart did *not* seem to have any qualities one might expect in a competent teacher, and despite supposedly having defeated all sorts of monsters had not detected spells on the custard he’d helped himself to, and had freaked out over being turned into a canary, or perhaps more because of the damage to his hair, which was hardly reassuring.

“Hello class,” Lockhart began once they were all inside, “I am Professor Gilderoy Lockhart, yes, *the* Gilderoy Lockhart. You needn’t tell me now how glad you are to have me, don’t worry, I already know. Now, I was originally going to have you do a practical on Cornish pixies, but I’m afraid the last class found them difficult to handle, and I’ve realized they really are a bit above second year level, so-”

“Excuse me Professor, but perhaps if you’d demonstrate what to do, we’d be able to learn how to deal with them,” Harry interrupted.

“Ah, yes, but I wouldn’t want any of you to get harmed, or the classroom torn apart-”

“You could just clear an area and place a shield up around it, and then release and deal with them inside it.”

“I really don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Alright then, it was just a thought. See you later.”

“Ah, what?”

“I don’t see any reason for us to have to do material the other classes haven’t yet, so if you won’t teach us how to deal with the pixies, I might as well leave.”

“But- what will I tell the other teachers? You can’t-”

“Tell them we were ahead of the other classes, and you decided to take the time to plan future lessons.”

Harry walked out the door with Theodore and Tracey following closely, leaving a dumbstruck Lockhart behind.

Blaise started to get to his feet, and then Malfoy stood.

“Well, what are you lot waiting for? Come *on*.”

Moments later, the rest of the class had followed Malfoy outside.

“Well done, Potter,” the Malfoy heir commented pompously, as if commenting on an employee’s work.

“Yes, he did handle Lockhart well, didn’t he. No question about how *he* got into Slytherin,” Tracey replied, smirking. Malfoy’s eyes narrowed.

“Alright then, everyone,” Harry interrupted, “remember to spread around that Lockhart’s terrified of pixies.”

Towards the end of dinner, Harry stood up and started over towards the Gryffindor table.

“Where are you going, Potter?” asked Tracey.

He turned to face her, and Theodore who was also watching curiously.

“I’m going to ask Hermione and the twins to study with me in the library after dinner.”

“Are you *trying* to piss off the rest of our house?” Tracey asked scornfully.

“I could always ask the twins to prank anyone who bothers me for it.”

“Right then. Count me in. You coming, Nott?”

“I think I’ll skip.”

Harry was smirking now.

“Come on, they’re all intelligent, and good at finding useful spells. Besides, you don’t really want to be left alone when you’re on Malfoy’s gang’s bad side, do you?”

Theodore glared at him, and then relented.

Mischief and Murmurs

Even when the weekend arrived, the halls were still filled with whispers when he passed. The small second year with messy black hair and a lightning bolt scar. He seemed so very human now, so very real, but the eyes were still haunting. Green eyes for the young Slytherin.

Neville Longbottom glimpsed the Boy-Who-Lived a way's ahead down the hallway and ran to catch up.

"Hi Harry. What's up?"

"Not much. You can come along if you like, I'm meeting some people in the library."

"Oh, uh, thanks."

They walked the rest of the way in silence.

Arriving, they found Hermione was already there.

"Hello, 'Mione."

"Harry! There you are. I thought you'd better see this..."

She shoved a copy of the Daily Prophet across the table to him.

"Sirius Black has been sighted, and that's not far from here."

At the top of the page was an article entitled "Ministry to Assign Dementors to Guard Hogwarts?" which was illustrated by a wizarding photo of the infamous Sirius Black, laughing.

"I looked up dementors in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. They guard the wizarding prison. They- they suck the happiness out of people, Harry. Make them recall their worst memories."

"And they're considering bring them *here*? Do they effect everyone, or just criminals?"

“Everyone. The ministry wants them to deal with Black.”

“What are they going to do, make him suicidal?”

“Suck his soul out through his mouth, actually.”

Harry stared at her.

“You aren’t kidding, are you. Bloody hell.”

“What’s Longbottom doing here?” asked a familiar voice. Tracey Davis had arrived.

“I invited him,” Harry answered, rolling his eyes.

“Whatever for?”

“The real question is why he invited you,” Hermione snapped.

“He didn’t. He just said he’d be here. Nott will be along in a few minutes by the way, Potter.”

“Yes, I expected he would be.”

“Oh, and the twins have arrived.” She added as Fred and George entered the library. “Hello, Weasleys. What mischief have you been up to today?”

“Non, so far.” replied Fred as they took their seats. “Harry, would you mind hexing Malfoy for us? We’ll provide the prank supplies, you just use them on Malfoy while he’s sleeping.”

“Oh please do,” Tracey muttered.

“Wouldn’t it be a bit obvious I’d done it?”

“So?”

“What brought this on, anyhow?”

“The Slytherins have taken over the quidditch pitch when we booked it!” announced George dramatically.

"We're Slytherins," Harry cut in, "and I didn't know Malfoy was even on the quidditch team."

"He is now. His *daddy* brought him a position. New brooms for the whole team."

"Isn't that *horrendous*. While you're add it, why don't you brainstorm all people who annoy you."

"Well, there's Malfoy, Lockhart, Percy, that kid with the camera-"

"I was kidding."

"Oh. Right."

"Can't we just hex them or what not anyway?" Tracey commented in a bored tone.

"Since when were you part of this plot?" asked Fred, frowning.

"Since now, or I'll hex *you*."

"That really wouldn't be wise, little first year."

"Well-"

"You don't ever shut up, do you?" asked Theodore Nott, who had just arrived.

"Why you little-"

"Are they always like this?" a rather overwhelmed Neville asked Harry.

"Yes." Then as the twins, Tracey, and Theodore all turned to glare at him he added, "Hey, I never said that was a bad thing..."

Hermione laughed, the twins nodded approvingly, and Tracey smirked, while Theodore rolled his eyes.

"Right then," Hermione began, "now that we're all here, we can begin. So far on today's agenda we have whether to prank people, our homework, and I think we should study this charm as well," she

motioned to a library book in front of her, “to see if we can learn it, because the ministry is thinking about placing dementors to guard Hogwarts.”

The weeks past smoothly as October neared, in Harry’s opinion. The novelty of really being part of Hogwarts still hadn’t quite worn off. Harry was the only one to have managed the Patronus charm so far, a silver hawk that would shoot forward from the tip of his wand. He’d yet to have a dementor to try it on, however, and he had a nasty feeling that he would fail to give it corporal form in one’s presence. He wasn’t entirely surprised by the look of it really. *Freedom.*

It was a simple memory, really, just of the seven of them seated around their table in the library, but given everything else that’d happened to him, he appreciated it. It was safety, comfort, and a time when he could just *be*, and laugh a little. When he was part of something.

Really, he was quite pleased about how the year was going, he thought as he headed towards detention with Snape. He didn’t even regret having gotten this detention. Having heard, from way down in the common room, Malfoy’s scream at having woken up covered in tentacles and with a head of red and gold hair was simply worth it.

“Potter! There you are. Tonight you’ll be-”

“Leaving, in just a moment.” Harry interrupted. “As fun as it’s been, Snapey, playtime’s over. You had best start treating me civilly.”

“And why should I do that?” Snapped the furious Professor.

“Because you won’t be working here much longer if you don’t. Good evening, Professor.”

With that, Harry walked back out the door.

Snape hurried after him, to say or do what, he wasn’t sure, but on exiting the classroom he found that his troublesome student was nowhere in sight.

Harry had, of course, become invisible. He floated away, towards the tunnel where he still liked to sleep a large percentage of the time. It was then that he first hear the voice. *Let me rip you, let me tear you, let me kill you...* and although he wasn't entirely sure he hadn't imagined it, he *knew*. Trouble was on the way.

"Oh hello, Ronald."

"Don't talk to me, Potter."

"My memory may be off, but I believe we were on good terms last year."

"That was last year, you lying Slytherin scum."

"You really shouldn't judge people by their house, you know. You can't divide people into even little boxes like that. Peoples personalities do overlap houses, you know."

"They do *not*."

"So all Gryffindors are stupid, traitorous, lazy people with no ambition or cunning. The lack of cunning must make them all really horrible at chess..."

"They are not! You-"

"To be otherwise would require them to overlap personality traits, Ronald."

"Slytherins are still-"

"Hello Potter. *Please* say you didn't invite this one?" commented Tracey Davis, who'd just arrived.

"I didn't."

"Hey Weasleys! Your kid brother's invading our table!"

“Well, well, if it isn’t little Ronniekins. Good to see you. We have these new prank items we want to test-” began Fred. Ron fled the library, much to Tracey’s amusement.

“Er, hi guys, what was that all about?” asked Neville, who Ron had almost knocked over on his way out.

“What makes you think we had anything to do with it?” Tracey tried to look innocent. And failed.

Neville gave them a look.

“Oh alright, we did,” admitted George, not looking the least bit guilty, “but it wasn’t anything much.”

“So, what’s being planned at the moment?”

It was Harry that answered. “I’m looking forward to the Halloween feast, personally. These wizarding celebrations are quite entertaining.” *Not to mention the abundance of food.*

“That’s right, you grew up in the muggle world, didn’t you?”

Harry nodded.

“What are they like? Muggles, I mean.” Neville inquired, looking sheepish.

Harry thought on this for a moment, then answered: “They’re each unique, just like everyone else.”

The Halloween Feast was certainly something. The Great Hall was decorated with giant pumpkins and swooping bats, a band called the weird sisters was playing, and the tables were groaning with the weight of numerous dishes. Sitting here now, he couldn’t help but think that he’d have enjoyed it much more if they weren’t seated by house tables, so he could sit with the rest of his- allies, study partners, friends?

It would have been nice if the ghosts were here as well. He rather liked their company. They were all at Nick's death-day party, however. Nick had been rather dismayed about having to deal with "the Headless Hunt," but had cheered up a bit when Harry had assured him that head of Gryffindor house was a much more important job than anything the headless hunt did.

It wasn't until about an hour later that he realized anything had happened, and that was just from hearing Malfoy talking in the common room, surrounded by students. Apparently Filch's cat had been hung up by its tail, and words on the wall in blood next to it had read, "The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemy's of the heir beware, you'll be next, Mudbloods." Malfoy didn't actually know that much. His father had told him a little ahead of time, and he was instructed to "let the heir do their work."

"How come he gets to walk around like he owns the school when he doesn't even know *anything*," Tracey complained.

"Who knows," sighed Theodore.

"What do you make of this, Albus?" Severus Snape asked, surveying the scene. "Personally, I doubt Black was involved."

"What do you suspect, Severus?"

"I doubt any of the staff were responsible."

"You don't really believe any student capable of this, do you?"

"Haven't you considered Potter, Albus? His little tricks are quite something."

"Is that truly what you think, Severus, or is that an old grudge speaking?"

It was a moment before the Potions Master replied, and when he did, he spoke quietly.

"I'm not sure."

“I’d like to briefly address your curiosity on whether Sirius Black was involved in the incident yesterday.” Albus Dumbledore began, and the hall grew quiet.

“Although I cannot be sure, I do not think he was. He stands to gain nothing from doing so, for one thing, but mainly I do not believe Black could be the heir of Slytherin. He was, after all, in Gryffindor.”

Shocked gasps and whispers filled the hall, especially at the Gryffindor table. Tracey laughed.

Ronald Weasley, from where Harry sat, looked shocked.

“The ministry has, however, decided to place dementors guard over Hogwarts. I warn you to be careful around them. They are both dangerous and unforgiving.”

Chapter Five: Heir of Snakes or “Truly Evil”

Sirius Black was near by. An attack on the school had been made by an unknown source who had opened a secret chamber. Dementors were coming to Hogwarts. Harry Potter, as well as the rest of Hogwarts's occupants, had a great deal to think about.

Between listening to Malfoy and the information Hermione was able to get from Professor Binns, Harry had gathered some basic information on the “Chamber of Secrets.” It had supposedly been built by Salazar Slytherin to contain a monster which would “cleanse” Hogwarts of “dirty blood”.

The chamber was to be opened, and the monster controlled by Slytherin's heir. Most notably, he had gathered from numerous times of hearing Malfoy talk in the Slytherin dungeons that the chamber of secrets had been opened fifty years ago.

The annoying factor of the whole business was how it seemed to effect the simplest parts of every day life. All the Slytherins received suspicious glances from the other houses almost constantly, though at least the two Ravenclaws who sat with Harry, Tracey, and Theodore in Herbology, Mandy Brocklehurst and Terry Boot, continued to act normally.

Even the daily gatherings in the library began to get hostile. When Hermione brought up the Chamber of Secrets one time, Tracey had commented rather nastily, “You *would* be concerned, wouldn't you Granger?” Nott, acting withdrawn as usual, wasn't helpful in the least. Neville had been carrying around an assortment of supposed protective devices, and was often far more nervous than usual. Even the twins had problems going on, though theirs consisted of trying to cheer up their distraught little sister, Ginny. According to Hermione, however, they weren't going about it in the right way at all.

Malfoy was probably the biggest annoyance. The pale aristocrat now acted as if he owned the school, and enjoyed a great deal of attention in Slytherin house. From what Harry had heard, however, the boy didn't know any more than he did.

It was, however, with the incompetent teacher Gilderoy Lockhart that the real trouble began.

The dueling club was announced with notices all around the school. It wasn't until Harry arrived that he knew for sure that Lockhart was the one that was holding it. To his surprise, he found Snape had somehow been cajoled into assisting. The man looked positively mutinous. Lockhart found himself thrown backwards and disarmed moments later in his demonstration duel, and hastily moved things forward, having the students paired up to practice dueling. Unfortunately for Harry, Snape came around and paired him with Malfoy. He really needed to patch up things with Snape sometime soon...

Malfoy threw the first curse, and Harry dodged, keeping his wand in his hand down by his side. After dodging several more spells, he brought his wand up abruptly and sent out a jelly-legs curse mid-dodge. He quickly followed it up with a tarantallegra hex. It was normally a harmless spell, merely causing the victim to dance, but combined with the jelly-legs it had Malfoy stumbling perpetually, falling over several times. Harry took advantage of the time to successfully try out the "expelliarmus" spell.

The hall was in complete chaos, until Snape took control, casting "finite incantatem" across the hall, canceling the various enchantments that had been cast during the duels. Glancing around, he could see Hermione in a headlock with Millicent. He was just walking over to pull Millicent off when a beacon of red light collided with her, causing her to fall over under a full body bind spell, and leaving Hermione free to pick up her wand from the floor. Glancing in the direction the spell had come from, he found himself looking at Tracey Davis, who was smirking as usual. Typical. She never had liked Millicent much... He turned back to keep an eye on Malfoy.

A flustered Lockhart began to speak.

"I think I'd better teach you how to *block* unfriendly spells. Let's have a volunteer pair- Longbottom and Finch-Fletchley, how about you?"

“A bad idea, Professor Lockhart,” said Snape, gliding over, “Longbottom causes devastation with the simplest spells. We’d be sending Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox. How about Malfoy and Potter?”

Snape’s face had spread into a nasty smile. Lockhart was now looking decidedly nervous.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea- well if you insist...”

He nervously beckoned Harry and Malfoy into the middle of the hall as the crowd backed away to give them room.

“Now Harry,” said Lockhart as Harry watched him skeptically, “when Draco points his wand at you, you do *this*.”

He raised his own wand, attempted some sort of complex wand movement, failed miserably, and dropped his wand.

“Whoops- my wand is a little overexcited-”

Snape moved closer to Malfoy, bent down, and whispered something in his ear. Malfoy smirked, too.

Harry met the other boy’s eyes coolly, eyebrows raised.

Lockhart cuffed Harry merrily on the shoulder. “Just do what I did, Harry!”

“What, drop my wand?”

But Lockhart wasn’t listening.

“Three- two- one- go!” he shouted.

Malfoy raised his wand quickly and bellowed, “*Serpensortia!*”

He fell over only seconds later as a body-bind curse from Harry’s wand connected with him. Snape and Lockhart might have protested if it hadn’t been for a distraction of the long black snake that had been the result of Malfoy’s spell.

Lockhart stepped forward, brandishing his wand. There was a loud bang, and the snake flew ten feet into the air and fell back to the floor. It slithered, hissing furiously, towards the nearest student, a Hufflepuff that was in Harry's charm's class whom he didn't know the name of. The snake raised itself, fangs exposed.

Harry acted on instinct- something he'd become accustomed to from living on the streets. He stepped forward quickly, telling the snake to "leave him alone." Then the snake slumped docilely to the floor, its eyes now on Harry. He glanced around the hall, which was filled with ominous muttering. He supposed something about the display must have been suspicious, though he was unsure whether it was Malfoy summoning a snake, or that it had obeyed him. He had a nasty feeling it was the latter. Snape had begun walking towards it, wand out. Harry, acted quickly, scooping up the snake from the floor and heading over to where Tracey was waiting for him. Nott had decided against coming to the club.

"So you're a parselmouth," she commented as he reached her, glancing around the hall with an amused look, "and you seem to have scare the poor little Hufflepuffs with your hissing. Nice Snake, by the way."

"Thanks." *Hissing?* Had he not been speaking normally, than? *Parselmouth*, like Salazar *Slytherin*? They walked back down to the Slytherin dungeons without further comment, paying no heed to the fearful whispers from other houses- or to the admiring (and for Tracey, who was walking at Harry's side, jealous) glances from their own.

"Albus, you can't seriously deny it now. The boy's a parselmouth!"

"Don't be silly, Severus. He's hardly the only parselmouth in the world."

"So who do you think is, then?"

"I think, Severus, that it is not a question of *who*, but of *how*."

The next day found Hermione sitting in a corner of the Gryffindor common room, working. She hears a familiar voice inform her that it's nearly seven thirty, and she looks up. Neville Longbottom is standing there with his bag, looking at her expectantly.

"So?" she inquires.

"Aren't you coming?"

Hermione sighs. "I'm not sure."

"What? Why not?"

"Haven't you heard what people have been saying, Neville?"

"You can't possibly believe that."

"Why not! Why should I trust someone who doesn't trust me?"

"He trusts us," Neville argues stubbornly. "He spends time with us, doesn't he? Helps us, talks with us, laughs with us. He trusts easily enough."

"Ah yes. But that's the extent of it, isn't it, of Harry Potter's *trust*. But we heard Quirrel had gone evil, and tried to steal some powerful magical artifact but was stopped. *Just around the time Harry disappeared*. And he never told me anything about what was going on, not then, not after. I'm not sure I can trust someone like that."

"I can."

She stares at him.

"You really trust him. Why?"

Neville shrugs. "Because I think I know him well enough to say he isn't the heir. And, well... someone has to."

She looks at him consideringly for a moment, then nods. "Just wait a second while I get my books together."

The day after the dueling club, Malfoy approached the library table where Harry (the snake curled lazily around his shoulders), Tracey, and Theodore sat. He wore expression that was slightly wary, grudgingly respectful- and somehow still arrogant.

"Ah, hello Harry," Malfoy said, reaching for a chair. Malfoy's gang, close behind, are watching intently.

"Just because our house suddenly holds me in higher esteem doesn't mean we want your company, Malfoy," Harry replied, pulling the chair away from Malfoy's reach.

"Come on, Potter, there's plenty of room at the table-"

"No there isn't. This table's taken." Tracey cut in. "Hey, Fred, George, Neville, Hermione! Hurry up, will you? Unwanted people are trying to invade our table!"

Malfoy gaped, astonished, as the said Gryffindors who had just entered the library hurried over. Surveying the scene, a smile spread across Hermione's face, and surprisingly, she reached across the table to high-five a smirking Tracey.

Perhaps relations with the rest of the school were worse in general, Harry thought, but somehow he didn't regret having attended the dueling club in the least.

The intense suspicion from the rest of the school did not fade in the days following. Harry, who felt he might as well enjoy the unease of his classmates if they were going to insist on assuming the worst of him decided to keep the snake with him at all times. Hermione and Neville seemed to trust him unconditionally, for which he was grateful. The twins simply made a joke of the entire thing, parading around, bowing to Harry, and announcing for people to "make way for the heir of Slytherin, truly evil guy..." whenever they came across him. As for Tracey and Theodore- well, they didn't really seem to care whether he was the heir of Slytherin or not. Tracey took advantage of the situation in every possible way- annoying Malfoy as much as possible and having first years fetch things for her, sometimes allowing these

youngsters to sit near them in the Slytherin common room as a reward.

Harry found the constant suspicion rather annoying, but he was for more concerned with Black, and with who the real heir of Slytherin might be.

Chapter Six: Phantom Attack

“What’s going on?” Harry asked Tracey and Theodore, glancing around the hallways. The whispers seemed to have increased tenfold since he’d last walked through these halls, and the Hogwarts population seemed on the verge of panic.

“Another attack. The Gryffindor ghost got petrified-“

“Nick?” Harry interrupted, “Bloody hell.”

“Along with some Hufflepuff..” Nott finished.

“Finch-Fletchley. Same guy your pal there,” Tracey motioned toward the black snake that was Harry’s constant companion lately, “attacked the other night.”

“Great. Just great,” Harry muttered sarcastically. “And Silas never actually attacked him anyway. Not that I would have blamed him if he had, having just been magically transported to a strange place and dropped from ten feet in the air.”

“The thing has a *name* now?” Tracey asked incredulously. Nott rolled his eyes, and Harry glared at her. Tracey just laughed.

“Nick? But I always thought he and Nick got along...” Dean Thomas muttered as the Gryffindor second years headed back to the common room that after lunch.

“They *do*.” Neville snapped furiously, much to the shock of everyone around them.

“Look, Neville, I know he’s your potions partner, but-”

“He’s my friend.”

“And mine.” Hermione had reached them. Dean looked a bit taken aback, and drew slightly away from the crowd with the two of them.

"You really don't think it's him, then?"

"Of course not!" said Hermione emphatically.

"I admit I'd never think it was him from what I know of him, but I'd never have thought he'd be in Slytherin, either. And he was plotting a soccer tournament with us last year... has he ever expressed any opinions on muggles?"

"I asked him what muggles were like once-" Neville began, and at Dean's startle look added, "well, I've never met one! Anyhow, he said they were all- er- they're all different... just like everyone else. Something like that. Listen, why don't you come with us to see him?"

"Well... I guess I will. He always was good company."

"Who's this then, another mudblood?" asked Tracey when Hermione and Neville arrived with Dean. Hermione glared at her fiercely. "*Muggleborn* then. Well, are you going to answer me?"

"Yes, I think so."

"*Think* so? Are you or aren't you?"

"Tracey!" Harry exclaimed.

"I don't actually know who my father is. He disappeared before I was born."

"That'd have been during the war," Tracey commented thoughtfully.

"I'd never thought of that. It'd be rather interesting to know if... well..."

Harry nodded. "We can try and help out if you'd like."

"Thanks. I'll try and find out his name over break, then."

An abnormally large number of students were leaving to go home for Christmas, the panicked masses anxious to get home for the holidays in addition to the students who normally left over break. Only the

Weasleys, Harry, Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and a small assortment of Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs (none of them second years) were staying.

Harry, Fred and George went to see the others off, waving as the train flew down the tracks and out of sight amidst swirling waves of snow.

“Anyone left in your house, Harry?”

“Just Malfoy and a few of his lot.” The twins exchanged a look at this.

“Please, attack him next,” joked Fred.

“Come on, you’re coming to Gryffindor tower with us.”

Harry allowed himself to be dragged toward Gryffindor tower. Unfortunately, they ran into Percy “Prefect” Weasley on the way.

“What do you two think you’re up to?”

“Move out of the way, Percy, Harry’s in a hurry.”

“Yeah, he’s off to the chamber of secrets for a cup of tea with his fanged servant.”

“It’s no laughing matter! And besides, that’s the way to Gryffindor tower.”

“Yep.” and with that, the twins pushed past him, dragging Harry with them, leaving Percy glaring after them.

Harry woke early Christmas morning- or rather was woken by two grinning Weasleys. He’d stayed the night in the fifth year Gryffindor dorm with the twins. To his surprise, he found a pile of packages at the foot of his bed.

There was a package of Zonkos prank supplies from the twins, a homemade sweater from their mother (we did mention you in a few letters, and we think Ginny did too...), a luxury eagle feather quill from

Hermione, a book of hexes and curses from Tracey, a book on Salazar Slytherin from Theodore, and surprisingly (or perhaps not), a green velvet cape with a silver snake clasp from Draco Malfoy. The twins found it extremely amusing, and insisted he wear it along with the Weasley sweater, making for an extremely strange looking outfit.

Finally, he had only one package left to open. The note attached to it read:

“Harry,

Your father left this in my possession before he died.

I leave it to you now, although you probably won’t need it.

Use it wisely.”

There was no signature. Inside, Harry found something made of flowing silvery fabric.

“Blimey, an invisibility cloak!” exclaimed George.

“It makes people invisible?”

“What else would it do, turn you silver?” said Fred.

“You both can borrow it then,” Harry replied, tossing it over to the twins.

“Are you sure? I mean, I know it’s Christmas, but you’ve already-” George motioned toward the bag of galleons Harry had given them, labeled with a note reading “for the joke shop.”

Harry turned invisible, and back again. “I’m sure.”

Fred snorted. “Right then, mate, just let us know when you’d like to use it for something.”

A few moments later Gryffindor tower became complete chaos as the twins took advantage of the cloak to wake the rest of their family, invisible, before heading down to the Great Hall. Ron was wary of Harry as usual, Ginny was rather quiet and seemed strangely

fascinated by him, and Percy seemed reluctant to hang out with his family at all, but none of that could quell the laughter that dominated Christmas day, from the feast to the snowball fights to the evening hanging out by the Gryffindor common room fire. Fred and George spent the evening teaching Harry their charm to batter people with snowballs (he had to practice on cushions), Ginny watched and wrote in her diary, and Ron played chess with Percy. Harry made a mental note to challenge the youngest Weasley to a game before break ended. All in all, it had been a good day.

It couldn't last forever of course, Harry knew, there were plenty of things he'd have to deal with soon if he was going to stay alive much longer, but today was good.

Chapter Seven: The Marauding

As break progressed, Fred and George Weasley were in heaven, or something close to it. Pranks were going off everywhere. Harry had asked them not to prank Malfoy for the moment as to keep the him guessing as to where he stood with Harry *keep your friends close and your enemies closer* but they had taken every opportunity to prank Crabbe and Goyle, keeping the blond haired boy the escorted constantly on edge.

Harry was amused. He had no particular liking or hatred for the Malfoy heir, though he could be a nuisance, and did not see any advantage of making an enemy of him. He had no intention of getting on friendly terms with the boy either, especially as Malfoy's temporary respect for him was due to his belief that Harry was the heir of Slytherin, and should Malfoy get to close he would discover that to be false, which would only cause Harry trouble in his own house.

Harry, however, had other things to think about as well. He had no idea where Black was, who the heir of Slytherin might be, where the chamber was located, or what monster it might contain. For the moment he settled to researching how to sense energy, and the difference between magical aura and life force. It was important that he understand how others could detect him, and he hoped that perhaps learning such skills might help in dealing with Black- and with the heir of Slytherin, and Slytherin's monster.

Unfortunately, this was far easier said than done, and after several minutes of fruitless searching he enlisted the help of Madame Pince. After several minutes looking through library catalogs and shelves towards the back, she handed him a small leather-bound book, its casing worn and faded, pages yellowed parchment. He flipped it open, and began to read:

Sensing varying types of energy is a skill requiring both awareness and practice. Life energy and auras cannot be differentiate without observation and practice, though recognizing them together is one of the first things to attempt, since the combination is easiest to detect.

If this is an area of study that interests you, the very first thing you must do is become consistently as aware of your surroundings as possible. Pay close attention to the senses that are commonly ignored by humans, especially hearing and smell, and to all aspects of your surroundings.

Close your eyes. Focus your attention inward, on your heartbeat-pulse-breath-life-energy. Slow your breathing, and allow your awareness to spread outwards. Hear, smell, and feel the space around you. Feel for the presence of people near by. It will seem faint, at first, but with practice it will become easier to detect.

Paying attention to your surroundings is vital. In still water, the way the currents come back to you after you've disturbed it can alert you as to the proximity of other objects. Air, also, can alert you to your surroundings, though it is more subtle, and takes more practice to feel where there is open space, and where there are objects. You will want to be able to not only detect things around you, but to eventually differentiate between the living and the non-living, the magical and the non-magical.

Practice walking with your eyes closed. You will feel oddly unsteady at first. Our ability to walk and balance ourselves is strongly linked to our sight. You will gain steadiness, and gradually stop running into things as you slowly develop your sixth sense...

-Chapter One, The Book of Sight

After a few days of chaos the twins had withdrawn, spending most of their time in intensive research, so it was to Harry's surprise when they came down the stairs from their dorm and called out to him where he sat reading.

"Harry! We're going to Hogsmeade, wanna come?"

"Sure-"

"He can't go to Hogsmeade, he's not a third year!" interrupted Ron from the corner of the common room.

"No need to fret, Ronald, you can come too," Harry told the younger Weasley, glancing over to the twins, who nodded.

"I'll check on Ginny to see if she wants to come, get the cloak and meet me by the passage. She's in the library, right?"

"Yep. Good thought, mate, she's been a bit freaked over the whole chamber of secrets thing, an outing would probably do her good," commented George.

"Right, see you there!"

"Ginny!"

"Er... uh, Harry, hi..."

"Your brothers and I are going to Hogsmeade, and I we were wondering if like to come with us."

"What? Now? How... I mean, sure."

"Come on, we're supposed to meet them by the passage."

She got up hurriedly to follow him out of the library."

Emerging from the cellar of Honeyduke's behind Fred and George, Harry (invisible) and Ron and Ginny (under the cloak), were eager to look around and explore, having never before been to the village. Even just Honeyduke's was fascinating, containing a wide variety of sweets, from sugar quills to chocolates to cockroach clusters and blood pops. George bought a small variety of treats for Ginny, much to Ron's annoyance, before moving on. The twins lead them through a variety of shops, including the joke shop Zonko's and the local apothecary, the latter in which they spent quite a while picking out ingredients, presumably for their experiments.

Surprisingly, even Ron was acting warmly towards Harry, enthusiastically pointing out

things he found intriguing in the shops to both Harry and Ginny. The two younger Weasleys's enthusiasm in exploration tied the three of them together for the moment.

The five of them had paused in the Three Broomsticks for butter-beer when, to their misfortune, McGonagall and Hagrid entered the pub, accompanied by a man in pinstriped robes ("Fudge," Fred whispered to his younger, invisible companions). They sat quietly, not wanting to attract attention.

It was the topic of conversation, however, that caught Harry's interest. He sat quietly, absorbing the information. *Best friend, secret keeper, godfather, Pettigrew...* When the adults had left, they moved on up the hill, towards a building the twins referred to as "the shrieking shack" which was, evidentially, haunted. It was then that Harry spotted a dark shape in the shadows.

Stepping forward, he could see that it was a large black creature, a bear-like dog. It was watching him with a strange intensity. He held out a hand.

"Come here, boy, I won't hurt you." It bounded forward eagerly, and began licking his hand.

"*That's not a dog,*" Silas hissed to him from around his neck.

"*I thought not. A human, then?*"

"Yes."

Harry turned back to the man-dog. *Animagus, like McGonagall...*

"Would you like to come with me? I could use a good guard dog."

The animagus barked enthusiastically. *It could be Black. I'll have to be careful* Harry thought, and then, *keep your friends close and your enemies closer...*

"How come you get to keep him?" asked Ron in a disgruntled voice.

“Because he wants me to, don't you?” The animagus barked again, rubbing against Harry's leg.

“Some people have all the luck,” muttered Ron, but he was smiling.

“You never know, a stray dog could be trouble,” Ginny commented to Ron.

“Yes, it could,” Harry agreed, “I think I'll call it... Padfoot.” *After the marauder. It fits, after all, and for all I know, he could be.* ‘Padfoot’ barked enthusiastically, and licked Harry's hand.

The twins laughed. “Yep,” announced Fred, “He'll be trouble alright.”

As they trudged back towards the tunnel, Harry whispered to Silas, “*Could you keep watch while I sleep? You can always sleep about my neck during classes, and I'd like you to be able to wake me if the man-dog tries anything.*”

“Of course, Harry Potter.”

Chapter Eight: New Disturbances

As the days past, 'Padfoot,' the man dog, tried nothing. He slept faithfully at Harry's feet, much to the twins' amusement. Break ended, Harry went back to the Slytherin dungeons, and students spilled back into Hogwarts. Padfoot seemed confused and distressed by the move *he was a Gryffindor, wasn't he...*and Harry took a few minutes to explain that he'd only been staying in Gryffindor tower for the break, and to instruct the 'dog' to keep an eye out for danger.

Harry was able to truthfully report to Hermione that he'd been studying magic in the hopes of learning skills that might help him should he run into danger. Tracey approved of 'Padfoot' from the first time she saw him growl at Malfoy, a sight which amused her greatly.

Dean brought back what information he'd gotten from his mother about his biological father, a man named Benjy Fenwick (Thomas was his step-father's surname). Harry personally wrote a letter to the ministry inquiring about the man, and received a letter several days later.

Dear Mr. Potter,

*The person about whom you inquired, Mr. Fenwick,
was indeed a wizard. We must regretfully inform you
that he was killed by Death Eaters in the war with
Voldemort many years ago. Hopefully the information
is of some assistance.*

Sincerely,

Stamford Jorkins,

Ministry of Magic, Department of Records

Dean took the news pretty well, probably because he already had a family. He'd never known his biological father, after all. He thanked Harry for the help, and spent a portion of his free time studying books on the war, sometimes pointing out interesting facts he found to the others. He took time, as well, to owl his mother and inform her, as, he pointed out, she deserved to know.

The days fell into a pattern again, classes, studying, meetings. Harry took advantage of history of magic to practice awareness, and to practice sensing the difference between the sense of ghosts, objects, and classmates, and spent a little time each day walking around outside with his eyes closed, accompanied by Padfoot and Silas.

Things had started to calm down a little at Hogwarts. There had been no attacks for weeks, and students had had time to go home and regroup. Harry still had a sort of distant respect, in some cases tinged with fear, from his fellow slytherins, and they all still had the school's general distrust, but the sense of panic had faded. Surprisingly, or perhaps *not* so surprisingly, the school's next bout of distress stemmed from Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher Gilderoy Lockhart.

The morning of February fourteenth, Harry found upon arriving for breakfast that the walls of the Great Hall had been covered in paper flowers. *Pink* paper flowers. Not to mention the heart-shaped confetti falling from the ceiling.

"Who..." muttered Tracey, who had just arrived and sat down by Harry. Then she spotted the obvious perpetrator, who was sitting at the head table in florescent pink robes. "Lockhart. I'm going to *kill* him. Or better yet, hire the twins to."

"Last I checked, they were pranksters, not assassins," Harry told her, amused.

"Your point being?" she muttered back.

"What's got you so worked up this fine morning?" asked Nott, who had just arrived.

“All this *pink!*” exclaimed Tracey. “*Stupid, fussy*, excuse for a holiday.”

Nott laughed.

“You can laugh all you want, but I promise you you’ll be sick of it by the time the day’s over.”

“Jokes already gotten old, from where I’m standing,” commented Harry, “Lockhart’s a complete idiot.”

“No kidding,” agreed Nott.

Unfortunately, the outlook for the day was about to go from bad to worse. Lockhart stood up and waved for silence. Snape looked extremely pained, and McGonagall was looking rather annoyed. Tracey was glaring mutinously at the pink-clad figure.

“Happy Valentine’s Day!” Lockhart shouted. “And may I thank the forty-six people who have so far sent me cards! Yes, I have taken the liberty of arranging this little surprise for you all- and it doesn’t end here!”

“Damn it!” Tracey muttered.

Lockhart clapped his hands and through the doors to the entrance hall marched a dozen surly-looking dwarfs, each of which wore a pair of golden wings and carried a harp.

“My friendly, card-carrying cupids!” beamed Lockhart. “They will be roving around the school today delivering your valentines! And the fun doesn’t stop here! I’m sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to show you how to whip up a Love Potion! And while you’re at it, Professor Flitwick knows more about Entrancing Enchantments than any wizard I’ve every met, the sly old dog!”

Flitwick buried his face in his hands, and Snape was looking murderous.

As soon as people started to clear out of the Great Hall, Tracey walked purposely over to the Gryffindor table and dropped a small bag of galleons in front of the twins.

“Lockhart is an idiot. Do something to him, sometime this year, and make it good.”

They looked her for a moment, then grinned. “As the Lady wishes.”

“Call me a lady again and I’ll hex you.”

“Right then, see you around, lady- er, *Davis*.” She glared at Fred, then walked off to rejoin Harry and Theodore on their way to class.

Through most of the day, the students suffered interruptions to their classes by Lockhart’s “friendly, card-carrying cupids”, much to the annoyance of the Professors. Just after transfiguration, Harry heard one of the things shouting his name.

“Oy, you! ’Arry Potter!” shouted a particularly grim-looking dwarf, elbowing people out of the way. It lunged at him. Harry dodged behind a suit of armor and disappeared. He remained floating several feet above the dwarf’s head, invisible.

“Where’d he-“

“Petrificus Totalus!” someone shouted, and dwarf fell to the floor. It was, unsurprisingly, Tracey Davis. She walked forward and kicked the thing to the side of the hall, a satisfied smirk on her face. Harry floated down behind the suit of armor, re-appeared, and stepped out into the hall.

“Thanks, Tracey.”

“No problem,” she replied, still smirking, “no problem at all....”

“You *are* planning something to do to Lockhart, aren’t you?” Tracey asked the twins when they, Harry, Nott, Neville, Hermione, and Dean met in the library after classes.

“Of course,” George assured her, “it’ll just be a week or two. We have plans.”

“I don’t see why you want to do anything to him at all,” Hermione frowned, “he’s just trying to cheer people up-”

“Don’t worry Granger; your precious professor will live.” Tracey snapped.

“We’d best head to dinner,” Harry intervened, rising from his seat. The others followed.

“Oh *no*,” groaned Tracey as they entered the Great Hall to find it still covered in the offending decorations, “Urgh, I *hate* Valentine’s Day.”

“That’s just because no one would ever want to be *your* valentine,” remarked Pansy Parkinson nastily.

“Haven’t you noticed that I’m surrounded by gorgeous guys and you’re *not*?” Tracey retorted. “I’ll bet Malfoy didn’t even send you a valentine. Not even *he* likes you.”

Parkinson went red in the face, and retreated to go sit down at far side of the Slytherin table.

“Well what’d you know, boys, she didn’t argue; apparently you’re gorgeous.”

“Of course we are,” replied Fred, “I’m astounded you didn’t realize sooner.”

“Either that or Parkinson has atrocious taste in guys,” Tracey added.

George snickered.

“Well, see you lot later,” Harry waved, and the group split to head to their separate tables for dinner. He couldn’t help wondering what the twins had planned, and couldn’t help looking forward to finding out.

Chapter Nine: Fools of April

To Harry's surprise, weeks passed with no further attacks, or sign of Slytherin's heir. Also to his surprise, Black, if he was Black, didn't seem to be up to anything at all. Perhaps he thought Harry would suffice as a substitute Voldemort. Perhaps he still held some affection for the Potter line. Maybe he was just biding his time- or perhaps he wasn't Black at all. In any case, the dog was good enough company, and he had Silas to keep an eye out while he slept.

The dog's presence had gone surprisingly unquestioned, which Harry suspected probably had a great deal to do with the information he held over the head of the Slytherin Head of House, as well as the fact that it seemed logical for him to have a guard dog, especially in light of the attacks which had taken place earlier in the year.

Harry continued to practice "sixth sense" development, aided by instincts and reflexes built up by years of living a life far from easy or simple. He could now walk pretty stably with his eyes closed, and was fairly adept at sensing things around him when he focused on it. He still was no where near good enough to really be alerted by anything other than the usual senses, as he needed to consciously decide to check his surroundings, and he suspected that would take years. It seemed an interesting enough type of study that he continued to devote a few minutes each day to practice. There were, of course, plenty of other skills he wanted to learn eventually- to transform into an animal, for example, would be amazingly useful- but that would have to wait.

Black, Slytherin's heir, and Slytherin's monster weren't the only threat to the occupants of Hogwarts, however. On April first- their birthday- the Weasley twins struck.

The day started ordinarily enough. *Almost* ordinarily, anyhow, until Harry (with Silas and Padfoot), Nott, and Tracey entered the Great Hall and were immediately dragged to a table that had appeared in the middle of the hall (between the regular tables and the staff table) by Fred and George. Apparently they had insisted they have a table

where they might sit with *all* of their friends and family on their birthday- and Dumbledore had backed them up.

Several minutes into the meal the occupants of all the tables with the exception of their own began to float. Ginny Weasley gasped, looking up at the people in the air.

“George- Fred-”

“We had the house elves mix fizzing whizbees into their food,” George explained.

“*We’re* not going to start floating suddenly, are we?” asked Ron apprehensively, examining the food left on his plate suspiciously.

“Of course not, Ronniekins. Just sit back and watch the show.”

Ron simply glared at the twins mistrustfully. He’d lived with them long enough to know better than to trust them. It was then Harry noticed the changing hair-colors of the people at their table- and of everyone else in the hall with the exception of Snape, who had apparently removed the enchantment from his food. Everyone in the Great Hall now wore a head of Weasley-red hair except for Snape, who had evaded the hair dieing, but not the floating, and Lockhart, whose hair had fallen out. Looking up at the Great Hall’s floating occupants, Harry noted with amusement that the Headmaster had simply summoned their tables into the air so that they could continue eating, and was completely ignoring Lockhart’s furious gestures.

Then the doors burst open, and in entered five of the dwarves Lockhart had hired for Valentine’s Day. Glancing over at the twins, Harry found they were both smirking openly. They must have been planning this for a long time. The dwarfs marched to the center of the hall, where they looked up at the floating staff table and began to sing:

“Lockhart, Gilderoy

Is nothing but a useless toy.

He can’t teach the girls and boys

Because he knows nothing himself.
He's scared of pixies and everything else
His books are better left on the shelf
There isn't a single wizard or elf
That couldn't teach better.
All he studies is what to wear
Spends all his free time curling his hair
Never a sign of wear or tear
Or brains in Gilderoy Lockhart."

A large portion of the Great Hall applauded. The dwarves bowed, then walked over to the table where the twins sat with Lee Jordan, Harry, Hermione, Neville, Tracey, Nott, Dean, Ron, and Ginny. The twins tossed them a small bag of coins, which one of them caught, then they marched from the hall, leaving a red-faced Gilderoy Lockhart trying- and failing- to storm out of the hall from his place in mid air. Even Hermione was having difficulty sympathizing with the bald, red-faced, shouting figure.

There was a knock on the door of Dumbledore's office.

"Come in, Gilderoy."

"Dumbledore, I simply cannot deal with this anymore. I'm quitting."

"Wasn't your contract for a full year, Gilderoy?" said Dumbledore, looking up.

"Yes, but I resign all the same. This has been a total outrage-"

"Very well, I shall send a letter to the Daily Prophet detailing the circumstances."

“You can’t-”

“Of course I can. I’ll need to get out the word that I need a new Defense teacher, won’t I?”

“I- very well, I’ll stay, but only for the remainder of the year.” Lockhart pronounced stiffly, then marched from the room.

“Thank goodness for that,” Dumbledore muttered under his breath once he had gone.

The day continued to be a little less than normal. Not only did nearly the entire population of Hogwarts have red hair for the remainder of the, but both Defense Against the Dark Arts and Potions were canceled for the day. Harry might have thought the former to be just because of Lockhart’s current state of baldness if the twins hadn’t confided to him that they’d also hid a boggart in the defense classroom. Potions had been canceled for the day a few minutes into the first class, due to a supply of Filibusters wet-start fireworks that the twins had transfigured and mixed in with the ingredients on the supply table. After five fireworks went off upon being added into the student’s potions, Snape had apparently decided he’d best cancel class until he’d had time to sort out the real ingredients. The remaining classes, although they took place, were routinely disrupted as teachers discovered their quills had been replaced with sugar quills, and when they picked up what they thought were their wands to demonstrate spells to the class, only to have them squawk and turn into rubber chickens. It was, in short, the sort of day that made Harry glad to be at Hogwarts.

Chapter Ten: Serpent King

“Nothing ever stays running a smooth course for long. Sometimes it seems that life insists on perpetually breaking down.”

The morning of the Gryffindor-Hufflepuff match dawned bright and clear. It seemed, at first, to be a calm day, a good day for quidditch. Harry, Nott, and Tracey were planning to watch the game with the gryffindors after breakfast, since the twins would be playing.

As they were walking towards the quidditch pitch with the gryffindors to save seats, Harry heard it.

“Let me rip you... tear you... kill you...”

He stopped walking, and addressed the snake around his neck.

“Silas... did you hear that voice? The one that spoke of slaughter?”

“Yesss.”

So it was parseltounge, then. “Who... what was- is it?”

The snake paused for a moment, then answered, *“The Serpent King.”*

“Harry?”

Harry turned in the direction of the voice, surprised. Hermione fallen back from the group and was standing there looking at him inquiringly.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I- I think Silas knows what the monster is,” he answered quietly, “he calls it the ‘Serpent King’”.

Her eyes widened. *“I’m going to go look something up in the library. You go on; I’ll meet you there, and tell you if I find anything.”* With that, she rushed off.

The stands were crowded and bustling, full of noisy anticipation of the game to come. It was then that Professor McGonagall stood up, and everyone fell silent. Using the 'sonorus' charm, she addressed the crowd.

"This match is canceled." There was a sudden roar of protest from the crowd, and she waited until it had died down to continue. "There's been another attack. Students are to report to their common rooms immediately.

"Mr. Potter... you'd better come with me." Harry started making his way over to her.

"I'm coming," asserted Tracey, hurrying to follow Harry.

"Well don't leave us out!" shouted Fred, pushing his way through the crowd with his twin.

"Professor, I can assure you Harry didn't-" began Neville.

"That's enough. Potter, Weasley, Weasley, Longbottom, Davis, follow me *now*."

They fell silent, and followed. At first Harry thought that perhaps they were being led to Dumbledore's office, but as they got deeper into the castle he recognized the way to the hospital wing. Professor McGonagall ushered them inside with a short, whispered explanation:

"It's Miss Granger. We found her near the library with Miss Clearwater."

Her meaning was immediately obvious. Two new bodies had been added to the hospital wing's collection of petrified students. The group walked over to where she lay, and stood there in silence for a moment. Even Padfoot was still and silent.

"We found this with them," McGonagall added softly, gesturing to a small hand mirror, "I don't suppose you have any idea...?"

A mirror? And the position she's in, it looks like she's holding something else... "No, sorry."

“How... why Hermione? It’s not fair!” exclaimed Neville, wild-eyed and frantic.

“I’m afraid I have no answer for that, Mr. Longbottom,” replied the Gryffindor head-of-house heavily. “Our only comfort is in the knowledge that the mandrakes will be ready soon, and we’ll be able to revive the victims. Perhaps they’ll be able to tell us something.”

It was a much more resigned group that finally turned to leave. As the others began to walk out, Harry hurriedly pried a small piece of paper from Hermione’s fist, and then followed.

“Well, see you Harry.” said George, attempting a forced half-smile. The gryffindors split off to head up towards the tower.

Harry and Tracey walked back towards the Slytherin dungeons in silence at first, until it was broken suddenly.

“We need to find out who did it, so that I can hex them to dust!” exclaimed Tracey furiously.

Harry looked at her in surprise.

“I’ll never manage to keep my grades up without her to bug me to do my work,” she explained awkwardly, “and, well, she’s one of us, isn’t she? She may not be a Slytherin, but she has her good points, and whoever had no right....”

Harry nodded, “I understand, you don’t have to explain.”

“Good. And for future reference,” she mock-glared at Harry, then winked, “you didn’t hear me say *anything*. Got it?”

He laughed. “Of course not.”

They fell back into silence for the remainder of the way. Arriving at the Slytherin common room didn’t help Harry’s mood whatsoever. They were greeted by countless stares, some worshipful, some wary, some fearful. It wasn’t until later that evening that Harry finally had the opportunity to examine the bit of parchment he’d retrieved from Hermione away from prying eyes. Opening it, he discovered that it

was a page that had been torn from a book. Reading it through, he would find it both useful and informative. At first glance however, two words caught his attention; one the page's typed heading, the other scribbled in at the bottom.

Basilisk.

pipes.

Chapter Eleven: Whilst there remain

"All that is gold does not glitter,

Not all who wander are lost."

- JRR Tolkien

There wasn't time to waste, as far as Harry was concerned. One of their own had already been petrified. He needed more information, and soon. He walked quickly down the hall. If anyone was likely to know something about what had happened last time the chamber was opened, and likely to tell him what they knew, it would be Hogwarts' keeper of the keys and grounds- Rubeus Hagrid. He'd decided to go alone. Tracey wasn't exactly the best diplomat, Nott wasn't usually exactly warm with people, and it would be difficult to fetch one of the gryffindors without attracting attention, not to mention that he doubted troublemakers like the twins would be particularly helpful. So he was currently walking through the halls of Hogwarts on his own, on the way to Hagrid's hut.

But before he got there- he tried his best to listen carefully without pausing- he would have to deal with whoever was following him. He kept walking. Whoever was following him was doing a rather clumsy job of it, but still, he preferred to let them think he was unaware of their presence so that they might further let down their guard. It was a single human, of that he was sure, and as they had no basilisk accompaniment he felt no need to rush.

As he neared the front door he wheeled around and leaped forward, hand outstretched, grabbing the person behind him, and yanking off the invisibility cloak that had concealed his follower.

"Ah, Ronald," he commented lazily to the startled boy, "what are you doing with my cloak?"

"I asked Fred and George if I could borrow it, they didn't ask questions- where do you think you're going, Potter?"

“What business is it of yours?”

“Sneaking around at this time of night? And after an attack? I don't know what your up to, Potter, but-”

“And to think last time I saw you I was ‘Harry’. My name does seem to change a lot around you, doesn't it?”

“You-”

“I'm on my way to see the grounds keeper, Hagrid,” said Harry quietly, “From what little information I've gathered, the chamber has been opened before, fifty years ago. Of all the people who've be here that long, Hagrid's probably the most likely to tell what he knows.”

“So you mean to say you don't really know much more about what's going on than everyone else?” asked Ron skeptically.

“No, well, except...” It was important that this boy not get in his way, and the easiest way to avoid that would be to gain his trust. He withdrew the torn book page from his pocket. “When they took us up to see Hermione in the hospital wing after she was petrified, I found this crumpled in her hand,” he whispered, holding out the paper so that Ron could see it, “and I think she's probably right.”

“Merlin's beard...” Ron muttered, wide-eyed, and then looked back up at Harry. “If you're just going to visit Hagrid, I'm sure you won't mind me coming along.” He was watching Harry closely now. *He's testing me.*

“Of course not, as long as you're polite to him.”

Ron nodded stiffly, and together they made their way out of the castle, and across the grounds towards Hagrid's cabin.

Harry knocked three times on the large wooden door of Hagrid's hut and then he and Ron stood there patiently, waiting. He could he barking, and footsteps. A moment later the door swung open.

“Harry? How are yeh doin’? And who’s this with yeh? Isn’t it a bit late ter’ be wanderin’ around, what with the attacks an’ all? Come on inside.” Harry and Ron followed him into the hut, and sat down at a table inside.

“I’ve been alright, Hagrid, and this is Ron Weasley-”

“Weasley? Hope you’re not up ter trouble. ‘Spent ‘alf me life chasing yer twin brothers away from the forest.” *Good thing I didn’t bring them, then.*

“Of course he isn’t, he just wanted to come along with me for a visit,” Harry assured the man, “and as for the attacks... I’ve heard the chamber has been opened before, and I was wondering, since you’ve been here a long time, if you know anything about it, or how we could stop whoever-” Harry paused abruptly, “someone’s coming.”

“You two, hide, quick! If’n yer caught out here at this hour-”

Harry pulled Ron into the corner, and threw the cloak over them just moments before the door swung open.

In walked Dumbledore, and a wizard in pinstriped robes that Harry had seen once before in the Leaky Cauldron- the minister of magic, Cornelius Fudge.

“Cornelius, I really must protest, I’d trust Hagrid with my life-”

“Be that as it may, Dumbledore, something *must* be done. Just as a precaution, I’m sure you understand, we cannot allow someone with his history to remain at Hogwarts until we are sure- Ah Hagrid, I’m afraid we’ll be needing to take you into custody temporarily-”

“Surely you don’t mean- Azkaban?” Hagrid had paled drastically.

“It’s only temporary, nothing to worry about if you’re really innocent, just a precaution, you understand...”

But they were interrupted as the door burst open once more, revealing a tall blond aristocratic looking man who strutted inside without so much as wiping the mud off his boots.

“Ah, hello Lucius, what are you doing here?”

“Greetings, Minister. I was looking for the Headmaster,” he turned to Dumbledore, “although I admit I didn’t expect to find you in this,” he paused, looking around the hut scornfully, then drawled, “do you call this a *house*?”

Hagrid was glaring at the man.

“Please get to the point, Mr. Malfoy,” instructed Dumbledore firmly. *Lucius, Mr. Malfoy, Lucius Malfoy... Draco’s father, then?*

“I have a scroll here from the board of governors. It is our opinion that, as you have failed to put a stop to these... *incidents* that you ought to be removed. You will find I have all thirteen signatures here.”

“Remove Dumbledore! If Dumbledore leaves, they’ll be nothing to stop them! They’ll be *dyin’* next!”

“Calm down, Hagrid, it’ll be alright,” said Dumbledore quietly, then looked over to the two ministry officials. “I’ll come with you, but I must warn you that I will never truly be gone from Hogwarts, not while there remain some here who are loyal to me.”

“Whatever you say old man,” sneered Lucius, looking satisfied, but minorly unsettled.

Hagrid took several deep breaths. “Alrigh’, I’ll come. Only, someone’ll have ter look after Fang... and if anyone wanted ter find out anything, all they’d have to do was *follow the spiders*.”

As they made their way back up towards the castle, Harry could hear Ron muttering. “*Spiders*, urgh...” and then Ron turned to Harry and spoke, unsteady but decided:

“When you go to find out... whatever it is Hagrid meant for us to find out-” he took a deep breath, then continued, “I’m coming.”

Harry nodded.

Chapter Twelve: Acromantula Annoyance

“Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will let it pass over me and through me, and when it has passed I will turn and look down the path where fear has passed, and there will be nothing. Only I will remain.”

-Frank Herbert, Dune

It wasn't until a week later that Harry and Ron finally got to “follow the spiders”. Harry left Silas in his dormitory to avoid having the snake scare off the insects, but decided to bring Padfoot along. There was no knowing where the spiders might lead them. If the dog-man planned to try something, he'd mostly do it away from prying eyes. Harry would have to keep alert, but distance from the castle could give him more accurate information about the man's motives, which could work to his advantage.

Harry, Ron, and Padfoot followed the small trail of spiders in silence until they reached the edge of the forbidden forest.

“The Forbidden Forest?” Ron exclaimed, looking horrified.

“We have to find out whatever we can.” Harry said more assuredly than he felt. All his past experience, all his instincts, told him to turn back, but somehow he felt that he needed to face whatever lived within, find out what he could. “Are you coming with me, or not?”

Padfoot barked and inched closer to Harry. Ron paused for a moment, staring into the dark forest, and then answered:

“I'm coming.”

They began walking through the forest after the spiders, wands lit. It grew darker and denser and they walked deeper and deeper in.

Up ahead, Harry began to hear soft clicking sounds, and the sounds of many creatures moving around. Concentrating, he could sense things everywhere- the whole forest was alive.

Then a strange, clicking voice up from somewhere a ways in front of them called, "Hagrid? Is that you?"

"We are friends of Hagrid," Harry answered, "he's in trouble-"

"Why has Hagrid sent you?" said the creature in front of them, which had moved towards them so that Harry could now see it- a huge black spider- an *acromantula*. *A gigantic black spider with a poisonous bite and a tendency towards violence...*

"Well he didn't, exactly-" began Ron. Harry was tempted to hex him, but instead simply interrupted and tried to repair the damage.

"People from the ministry have taken Hagrid away; they think he's responsible for attacks on students by a creature in the school. We came to find out the truth."

"Of course Hagrid never opened the chamber. But last time he got blamed for it, after a girl was found dead in a bathroom. They thought / was the monster."

"What is it really?" asked Harry, curious as to how the spider would respond.

"We do not speak its name!" *Joy. Yep, it's definitely the basilisk, then...*

"Right," muttered Ron nervously, "we'll just be going, then..."

"Going?" clicked the spider. "I do not eat humans out of respect for Hagrid, but I cannot deny my children fresh meat when it wanders so willingly into our midst."

Moments later, the spiders were closing in. Harry floated above them, firing spells as fast as he could. Unfortunately, the huge spiders' thick hides were proving to be irritatingly resilient. So far itching spells directed at their eyes had proved more affective than stunning

charms, despite that they only caused the spiders to be confused and delayed. Harry thought their bellies might be more vulnerable, but aiming spells at their undersides would require one to be low enough that they could reach you. Looking down, Harry saw that he would have to be floating to the ground soon anyway. Ron had just had his wand knocked from his hand by one of the spiders, which was now lunging at the redhead-

But a moment later there was a ring of fire separating them from the spiders, and Padfoot had been replaced by the tall, ragged figure of a man who was now holding Ron's wand and helping the boy to his feet.

"You alright there, Ron? And Harry? Harry?" the man's voice was gruff and hoarse from lack of use. He whirled around frantically, trying to locate Harry.

"Right here," answered Harry, lowering himself so that he was floating, cross-legged, at eye level, "I'd had to come down to get Ronald, but you seem to have done that for me."

The man, obviously Sirius Black, though he was in a bit better health than in the newspaper pictures, probably because of the time he'd spent as Harry's pet, just stared up at him in surprise. Ronald seemed to be in shock, and was staring around wild-eyed.

"So," Harry continued when no one else said anything, "I think we'd best come up with a plan for getting out of here. I could probably levitate one of you while floating myself, but I'm not sure I can manage both, and it would probably be extremely awkward anyway. Anyone else have some ideas?"

"Accio!" shouted Black abruptly. "Brooms," he explained, "they should be here soon."

"Good. You'll have to teach me some of those spells sometime."

"Uh, Harry? Don't you know who that is?" Ron asked weakly.

"Yes."

Ron stared at him.

“You’re completely barmy!”

“So you’d rather stick around and have a party with the spiders.”

“...no....”

Three brooms came into sight, flying towards them. School brooms, so not particularly good ones, but they’d suit the purpose.

“Right then, come on.” Both of his companions were still staring at him oddly, but they followed his example and grabbed a broom, and soon the three of them were flying high above the spiders and the trees, in the direction of Hogwarts. They landed at the edge of the forest, and Padfoot *Black* banished the brooms.

It was then that Ron noticed a rustle in the grass, reached down, and picked up a scrawny gray rat.

“Ron?” Harry asked; eyebrows raised.

“What? Come on, unlike you, I don’t *have* a pet!”

The rat was struggling wildly, and Black was staring at it with an eerie intensity.

“Stupefy.” Harry muttered, waving his wand at the rat. “That’ll make it easier to transport him,” he explained to Ron.

Then Black spoke up again. “Both of you come with me, *now*.”

“Alright.” Harry agreed.

“What?” exclaimed Ron.

“As he’s been rather helpful in preserving our lives so far, I’m rather inclined to listen to him, for the moment, at least.”

They set off across the Hogwarts lawn, Black now in dog-form, and Ron reluctantly followed.

Chapter Thirteen: Marauders by Moonlight

"Everyone has a moment in his history which belongs particularly to him. It is the moment when his emotions achieve their most powerful sway over him, and afterward when you say to this person 'the world today' or 'life' or 'reality' he will assume you mean this moment, even if it is fifty years past. The world, through his unleashed emotions, imprinted itself upon him, and he carries the stamp of that passing moment forever."

-John Knowles

It was to a violently thrashing tree he lead them. Padfoot ducked under the branches and placed a paw on a knob at the roots, and the tree froze suddenly, allowing Harry and Ron to follow. There was a tunnel at the base of the tree, which they followed the dog into.

The tunnel was rough, long, and winding. Harry did his best to stay as alert as possible, but didn't sense any hidden monsters or danger. He was glad of the dark, as having his wand lit gave him a simple excuse to keep it out and in his hand without alerting the man in front of them. While he thought the man would probably already have made a move if he had wanted to kill them, he wasn't about to let his guard down.

The passage led them into a rather shabby building with boards nailed over every visible window. *The Shrieking Shack...*

Padfoot transformed back into a man, wand out.

"The rat.... give me the rat..."

"*Expelliarmus.*" Harry muttered lazily, reaching out to catch Ron's wand as it flew from Black's hand. "The rat, whoever he is, is unconscious. He's been stunned, as you know perfectly well, and is therefore not of first priority for the moment. For now, I should like to hear some explanations."

Both Black and Ron were staring at him once again. After a moment of silence, Black asked tentatively, "How much do you know?"

Harry paused for a moment, and decided to include the few guesses he was pretty sure on. It might be best to sound informed, in this case. "I know that you are Sirius Black, also known as Padfoot, that your best friend was James Potter, that he and his wife were under the Fidelius charm but were betrayed, and that you are my godfather. I know that you have no intention of killing us, and that the rat is an animagus," he paused to assess Black's reaction, and then deciding that what he'd said so far was truth, to Black's knowledge, added, "Wormtail, perhaps?" Black nodded.

"How long have you known who your dog was?" asked Black.

"I guessed it when I found you. I've been having Silas keep an eye on you while I sleep."

Black looked rather shocked, but never the less, he began to tell his tale:

"It was always the four of us when we were at Hogwarts; Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs. Prongs, your father, was a stag animagus. Wormtail over there is Peter Pettigrew, and Moony is a werewolf by the name of Remus Lupin. We became animagi so that we could safely keep him company on the full moon. We had some great times, running around and exploring together... but after Hogwarts we were in the war against Voldemort, and we found out Voldemort was after Lily and James. They decided to use the Fidelius charm, as you know. We knew there was a traitor somewhere close to them. I thought it was Remus... they asked me to be their secret keeper, but I convinced them to use Peter instead. I thought I could act as a decoy, lead the enemy off track. I was sure no one would suspect they had used Peter... but on Halloween night when I stopped by to check on him, I found him gone, with no sign of struggle. I rushed to your parents' house in Godric's Hollow, only to find it in ruins. I went after Pettigrew, but he was faster, blew up the street... and then the aurors came. I never even got a trial."

"Show us Pettigrew, then." Harry replied calmly. "Ron, hand Black the rat."

Ron handed the unconscious rat over to Black, and Harry handed the man Ron's wand. Black cast a spell at the rat, and it transformed rapidly into a man, which Black used an *enervate* to wake.

"S-Sirius... my old friend..." The man's eyes were lingering conspicuously on the door.

"Yeah, 'cause he's obviously not your friend *now*." Ron muttered.

"So you betrayed my parents to their deaths," said Harry with cold conviction, doing his best to further unnerve the new-comer, "what do you have to say for yourself?"

"What could I have done? The Dark Lord... you have no idea... he has weapons you can't imagine... I was scared, I was never brave like Sirius and Remus and James. I never meant for it to happen... He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named forced me-"

"DON'T LIE!" bellowed Black. "YOU'D BEEN PASSING INFORMATION TO HIM FOR A YEAR BEFORE LILY AND JAMES DIED! YOU WERE HIS SPY!"

"He- he was taking over everywhere!" gasped Pettigrew. "Wh- what was there to be gained by refusing him?"

"*Stupefy*. Ronald and I have to get back up to the castle. Bring Ron's wand up to the castle later." Harry told Black after stunning Wormtail, and then he left, followed by Ron, and they walked back up to the castle in silence.

It wouldn't be until a little while later, when they were walking through the first few corridors by the front entrance of Hogwarts that they would realize that something was wrong. Time within Hogwarts does not stand still, no matter how busy you might be elsewhere. While Sirius Black sat in the Shrieking Shack staring at the stunned figure of Peter Pettigrew and reminiscing on better times, Ron and Harry had no idea how close they were to trouble, nor how soon time would be running short.

Chapter Fourteen: Riddle me this

"These are the Halls of the Dead, where the spiders spin, and great circuits fall quiet one by one."

-Steven King

The corridors of Hogwarts were eerily quiet as Harry and Ron made their way inside. As they continued, Harry thought he heard something, and between that and sensing as best he could, he was sure. He placed a hand on Ron's shoulder. As Ron stopped, Harry muttered quietly, "I think someone's coming." Standing still, they could still hear footsteps, growing ever clearer.

Ron moved to the side of the corridor, closed his eyes, and covered himself with the cloak.

Harry hurriedly surveyed his surroundings. The corridor was empty for the moment, except for him, Ron, and a suit of armor - which had a spear. That would do, if it came down to that. He moved to stand by the suit of armor, listening and sensing carefully. The footsteps were drawing nearer, and yes, something was following. The basilisk, Harry was sure of that. It was still a ways behind the person walking towards them, however; he needn't close his eyes yet.

It was a boy several years older than Harry who rounded the corner and blinked in surprise at the sight of Harry standing quietly by the wall, watching him.

Dark hair and hazel eyes that now and then seemed to glint with a reddish-light, the boy, a fifth or sixth year Slytherin prefect by appearance, was no one Harry recognized. The robes weren't quite the current style uniform either. *An intruder. This is the one we've been seeking- the heir.*

"Who-" began the boy, but his mouth then quirked up into a smirk, "ah, Harry Potter, just the person I wanted to meet."

"Indeed? How coincidental. And you are the heir of Slytherin, are you not? What's your name?"

"You'd be correct, and I'm Tom, Tom Riddle." *Riddle. Three of them murdered, no sign of cause of death, and a dark-haired boy spotted on the grounds that day.*

"However, I'm afraid I don't have much time for formalities at the moment. Tell me, how was it that you defeated the greatest sorcerer of all time, and you only a baby?"

"Greatest sorcerer of all time? Who would that be?"

"Don't play games with me, boy," Riddle snarled, "I'm referring to Voldemort, as you know perfectly well."

"And what concern is it to you? He was after your time." Harry replied calmly, throwing in one of his few guesses about the stranger.

"Voldemort is my past, present, and future." Riddle wrote three words in the air with a wand, *Tom Marvolo Riddle*, which then rearranged themselves to spell something completely different: *I am Lord Voldemort*.

"Then why should I tell you anything?"

"We've got a lot in common, you and me. We're both half-bloods, orphans, Slytherins, parselmouths..."

"Dumbledore's on his way."

"What? How would you know even if he was?"

"I have many abilities," Harry replied, floating up to sit cross-legged in mid air. He refrained from smirking with some difficulty, trying his best to take advantage of the fact that the boy was already on edge.

"So do I," snapped Riddle savagely, turning and hissing an order to the direction from which he had come, "but I've tired of playing games. I must be going now, see you *never*, Potter."

As Riddle left, Harry floated to the ground, grabbed the spear from the suit of armor, crouched down, and waited. He could hear the basilisk slithering towards him, sense it drawing nearer, around the corner, and then...*wait until the last possible moment*...he could smell it, feel the slightest warmth of its breath and...*Now!* He half thrust, half threw the spear up into the lunging mouth as he dodged to the side, eyes still closed, throwing himself to the floor. Then, there was something wet dripping onto him from above. He could hear the snake gradually become completely still. He pushed himself to his feet and opened his eyes.

He'd just barely made it out of the way in time. The basilisk, however, hadn't been so lucky. *That thing is huge.*

"Ron," he called hoarsely, "the coast is clear."

Moments later Ron emerged from beneath the invisibility cloak on the other side of the hall, opened his eyes, and looked around.

"Bloody hell, Harry, did you?"

"Yeah."

"Where did the Riddle guy go?"

Harry pulled out the Marauders' Map and glanced over it thoroughly.

"He got away. I'm still not entirely sure *what* he was. I suppose we'd best go up and report to the headmaster, or whoever's currently in charge, on our findings now."

"Yeah," muttered Ron, who was still staring at the gigantic carcass monopolizing the hall. "Urgh. And I thought the spiders were bad."

"Well, there were a lot of them."

Ron still seemed rather shaken. "It's so quiet. D'you think everyone's alright?"

“I don’t know, but it’s usually pretty quiet in the middle of the night. I don’t think there’s much to be told from that. The staff will probably know.”

Ron nodded, and then followed Harry towards Dumbledore’s office.

“I almost wish we’d brought your crazy dog - whatever he is - with us,” Ron muttered, and Harry laughed.

They found Dumbledore’s office to be much more crowded than they had expected. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Tracey, and two redheaded adults Harry didn’t recognize were sitting inside. They all looked up as the boys entered.

“Well,” commented Tracey, looking up and down a blood-covered Harry, “it looks like I missed out on some fun.”

Chapter Fifteen: In the Wake

"...life is not the plans you make, but what happens to you instead."

- *Unknown*

The room broke into chaos almost immediately, every voice raised in inquiry, until Dumbledore motioned for them to quiet and the room fell into silence.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"He's fine, that's not his blood-" Ron started to reply, then muttered anxiously to Harry, "it isn't, is it?"

"Yes, I'm fine, and no, it isn't my blood." Harry answered calmly.

"Tell us what happened, please, Mr. Potter."

Harry shrugged. "Ron and I were investigating a clue Hagrid gave us last week, and we ran into a psycho and his pet basilisk as we were coming back into the hallway. Guy by the name of Riddle. He got away while I was busy with the basilisk."

Almost everyone in the room gasped at some time or other during this statement, except for Tracey, who looked rather amused, Ron, who already knew what had happened to them, and Dumbledore.

"And how did you escape the basilisk, Mr. Potter? And am I, or am I not mistaken in the impression that you knew what it was ahead of time?"

Harry withdrew the torn book page from his robe pocket and handed it to Dumbledore, who passed it around.

"I found that clutched in Hermione's hand when McGonagall took us up to the hospital wing," Harry told them, "and as for escaping the

basilisk, I killed it. It's still almost blocking that hallway, as a matter of fact."

Snape snorted.

"I was wondering if I could have it. I was thinking it probably has some parts that could have magical uses."

"Of course. What happened next?" asked Dumbledore.

"We came up here," answered Ron.

Dumbledore sighed, looking older than any of the students had ever seen him. "You haven't seen any sign of Miss Ginny Weasley, then?"

Ron gasped, "Ginny?"

"No, we haven't seen her," Harry answered quietly, "But Silas might be able to trace the basilisk's scent so we could find where it came from, if you think...?"

"There was another message on the wall: 'Her skeleton will lie in the chamber forever. Ginny is the only girl missing. The only *person* missing, now that we've found you too... besides Lockhart, that is, but I'm fairly sure he ran off. Your idea probably would be the most likely. Even if it's too late, as I fear, we could at least give her a proper funeral.'"

When Harry returned with Silas, it was a somber group he found waiting for him. He led the group back to where they'd left the basilisk, Ron just behind him. The adults simply stared at the thing for a moment, and then turned to stare at Harry, who shrugged.

He turned to Silas, "*Can you trace its scent?*"

"*Of course,*" the snake replied, sounding almost insulted, and he sent him down on the floor. Silas slithered quickly down the hall in the direction from which the basilisk had come, and the rest followed.

Much to the surprise of pretty much everyone, Silas led them to a girls' bathroom. Yeah, it was near where Mrs. Norris had been found, and yes, last time the chamber had been opened a dead girl *had* been found in a bathroom... but it was hardly a location most people would expect. Tracey had to bite her lip to stifle her laughter.

Walking inside, it was immediately obvious that this was the right place. Not because of the fierce storm that *didn't* start when they walked inside, or because of the dramatic spooky music that *didn't* start playing, or because it was haunted, or because the floor was covered in an inch of water, or even because it looked like the sort of bathroom you'd find in a building that had been abandoned for years... it was obvious that they'd come to the right place because Riddle had left the entrance to the chamber of secrets wide open.

Idiot. I suppose he was in a hurry, and had no intention of coming back this way...

"Alright, I'm going down, who's coming with me?"

"Me," said Ron immediately, staring anxiously at the gaping pipe.

"I am." Tracey insisted eagerly, a slight smirk on her lips now.

"I'd like to see Slytherin's chamber as well," Snape added.

"Alright then," concluded Dumbledore, "I'll wait here with Minerva, Arthur, and Molly. I'm a bit too old for slides, but I'll send Fawkes with you.

The "slide" was long, steep, winding, and grimy. Harry landed with a crunch at the bottom, jumped to the side to give the others room to land, and pulled out his wand. "*Lumos!*"

The ground was littered with the bones of small animals, the air damp and musty.

"That was fun." Tracey commented mildly after landing and moving to stand to the side by Harry. Ron didn't quite manage to land on his feet, and barely managed to roll out of the way in time to avoid being landed on by Snape. Tracey laughed. The sound echoed eerily in the

darkness. Fawkes came last, flying gracefully down the pipe to land on Harry's shoulder. Silas hissed in annoyance from around Harry's neck. The odd group made its way down the passage. The light from Harry's wand allowed them to see only a limited distance ahead, and there was a constant crunching from the bones under their feet. Then they saw something up ahead- a huge scaly shape-

"You don't think there could have been more than one-" Snape began apprehensively.

Tracey ran forward and kicked it. "Nope," she announced, grinning nastily at her head of house.

"If that had been-"

"I knew it wasn't."

"How?"

"I just did."

"And if you'd been wrong?"

Her grin widened. "It would have been worth it, just to see the look on your face."

"You little-"

"Quiet down, children." Harry interrupted.

"Did you hear that, Professor? You're multiple people now."

Snape glared at her, and then turned to stare at the thing ahead. "Basilisk skin..." he muttered. "Potter, do you have dibs on that too?"

"Yep," Harry replied, smirking.

"Brat."

They continued on past the basilisk skin. Everyone was silent now. There was the feeling, *we're getting close, soon we'll know...*

They stopped by a door, serpent statues on either side.

“*Open.*” Harry hissed, and they walked inside.

Ginny was lying on the floor a little ways in. Ron shouted her name, running forward and throwing himself to his knees by her side.

Her red hair streamed about her, contrasting sharply with deathly pale skin and clouded eyes, her form already stiff and cold.

“Ginny,” Ron whispered hoarsely, reaching out to touch her hand, “Ginny...”

There was a small, leather-bound black book next to her. Harry reached down and picked it up.

“Tom Riddle... this,” Harry muttered, “we’d best bring this along as well. Come on; let’s get her out of here.”

Hogwarts had a very strange sort of atmosphere the next day. Most of the school was delighted by the end of the time of danger. Most of the Slytherins were no longer quite sure how to treat Harry, though some of the first years simply continued to trail after him in a sort of grateful awe.

The Weasley twins, however, were depressingly lacking in cheer. Percy seemed rather lost. Ron continued to be rather out of it, and kept as close to Harry as possible. Neville seemed rather stunned, and Dean remained quiet and solemn. Even Tracey was lacking in sarcastic comments- until Malfoy made a nasty comment about Ginny’s death, at which she snapped, “Yeah, we’re all grief-torn that it wasn’t *you*.” It was in the middle of Potions, and Snape was walking by. To everyone’s surprise, he simply gave Malfoy detention.

Luckily, there was a bit of brightness in store for them that day. The petrified people were to be revived, and so that afternoon Harry, Fred, George, Ron, Percy, Tracey, Nott, Dean, Lee, and Neville trooped up to the hospital wing.

Hermione was just sitting up. There were several exclams of "Hermione!"- including from Tracey. Hermione looked up from Neville's embrace and raised an eyebrow at the slytherin girl.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you'd been worried," Hermione told her.

"Shh, it's a secret," Tracey replied in a solemn fake-whisper, and then her mouth twitched into a smile and she added, "it's good to have you back, Hermione."

Hermione smiled, then looking around and seeing the still rather somber faces around her asked, "What happed? Since I've been out, I mean."

"Our little sister-" George began.

"She's- *dead*." Fred finished.

Hermione just stared for a moment, open-mouthed. "Ginny?"

Ron nodded. He'd barely said a word all day.

"The basilisk is dead as well," Tracey added, "Harry got your note."

Hermione nodded, still looking shocked. "So it's over then."

"The heir got away," Harry told her, "the ordeal of the chamber may be over, but something else has begun."

Padfoot returned later that day carrying, to Harry's surprise, the familiar form of a certain stunned rat. When they finally got a moment alone, Sirius transformed.

"I decided it should be your choice," the convict told him quietly, "you've suffered because of him as well." The man was watching Harry anxiously to see how he reacted to this latest bid for trust. Harry looked at the rat consideringly.

“I’ll sneak out to Hogsmeade and get him a metal collar and leash later to keep him from transforming. We’ll keep him around for a while.” Harry paused for a moment and then continued, “I’ve acquired some basilisk parts for which the properties are unknown. I could use a lab-rat.”

Sirius’s face split into a grin, and he gave Harry an admiring look.

The funeral was to be the following day. Tracey helped the others spell a few temporary changes into their robes to make them closer to traditional funeral robes, and then they set out to meet Mr. and Mrs. Weasley at the gates. Of all the students, just Harry, the Weasley children, Tracey, Nott, Neville, Dean, Lee Jordan, Hermione, and two of the first year Slytherins who had been frequently tagging along, Sage Capper and Derek Harper, had decided to attend the funeral. Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore would, of course, would be attending as well.

Both Weasley parents had dark circles under their eyes. Mrs. Weasley’s face was covered in tearstains, and Mr. Weasley looked shocked and at a loss, trailing after his wife like a lost puppy.

There was a portkey waiting for them- an old quill. They landed by an open casket containing Ginny’s body, then moved, as instructed, to help carry in down a path to the place where she was to be buried.

The hole was already dug. They set down the casket, and allowed the crowd of mourners to take their turn with their goodbyes. Then Dumbledore dropped something into the casket, and the lid was placed on top. Everyone put on a shovelful of dirt. Then the crowd moved back, forming a circle around the mound, waiting. *What are they waiting for...?*

Dumbledore stepped forward, waved his wand, and muttered an incantation Harry didn’t catch. Then there were flames coming forth from the ground where the casket had been buried *are they burning the body now, then?* and then, as the flames died down, something began to sprout rapidly from the ground. A little tree.

The guests took turns coming up and saying a few words about Ginny, and their memories of her into some sort of microphone. Harry wondered at first, what it was for, but then, looking over at the tree, he realized. As people spoke, the tiny sapling continued to grow, very slowly now, and the bark darkened in places, forming words- the words spoken into the microphone. *A dappled tree of memories...*

By the end of the speeches, the sapling had sprouted little flowers- it was a red bud tree.

"It's a fine little tree," Arthur commented as people were beginning to leave, "and with all the protection spells around it, it will have many long years to grow." But there were words that hung unspoken in the air: *it will have time to grow up, like Ginny never did.*

Later that day, Harry cornered the twins for a quick word.

"I'm not saying you shouldn't mourn her," he told them quietly, "but she wouldn't want you to give up on your dreams, or spend too much of the time you've got to live in grief." He took a deep breath, then continued, "with troubled times likely not too far off, the world will need laughter more than ever."

Fred nodded solemnly, "we'll try our best, Harry."

"I'm afraid," George added, "that our family is already in great need of some cheer."

"You must think us very silly, moping so much, when you've lost *five* family members and-

"No," Harry replied firmly, "I don't even remember my parents, and I never liked the Dursleys much anyway. Besides, I'm use to getting along on my own. You have every right to grieve. Just remember, you have every right to live as well."

Chapter Sixteen: Sight by lightning

It cannot be seen, cannot be felt,

Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt.

It lies behind stars and under hills,

And empty holes it fills.

It comes first and follows after,

Ends life, kills laughter.

-J.R.R. Tolkien

The remaining portion of the school year was rather strange. Exams had been canceled, and none of the teachers were holding classes during the time period- not that there would have been any DADA anyway, since Lockhart had left. Fred, George, Harry, and Tracey spent a portion of the vast amount of free-time they now had putting together a description of Lockhart, and his not-so-many skills, complete with quotes from not only themselves, but also any student or teacher who would give negative comments on him, and a summary of his lessons. Having got this compiled to their satisfaction, they sent this in to the Daily Prophet.

All their teachers, and even the Headmaster, ended up contributing to this project. The twins took extreme satisfaction in ruining the career of the idiot fake who had abandoned the school, and their sister, in their time of need. And almost everyone hated the git anyway. Even Hermione didn't try to stop them, and even contributed a comment on the uselessness of Lockhart's curriculum.

Harry informed quite firmly by the Headmaster that he would *not* be sneaking off this summer, and he didn't bother to argue much. He wasn't sure his usual hideout would be particularly safe with Tom Riddle running around anyway. It seemed he would be spending the

summer with the Weasley family. Both Mr. and Mrs. Weasley seemed to have warm feelings towards him for having killed the monster from the chamber of secrets. The twins, and even Ron, seemed both grateful and relieved at this news.

“Fred! George! Ron! Harry! Over here!” called a voice from the crowd at Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. It was Mrs. Weasley, waving vigorously.

“You’d better write.” Tracey informed Harry.

“I don’t have an owl!”

Tracey just rolled her eyes, then turned to the twins, “you two as well, especially about any pranks or future prank ideas.”

“You’re *encouraging* them?” asked Hermione.

“Yep.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Typical.”

“Well, see you all.” Harry said, waving, and walked over with the Weasley children to greet their parents, Padfoot at his heels.

The burrow was probably one of the more interesting places Harry had visited, which was saying something. A wild looking garden, a pond, and a house that looked like something out of a fairy tale- tall, patchworked, and probably held up by magic.

“Awesome house.” Harry commented.

“It’s not much, but-“

“So you tell the street-kid,” Harry replied, and Ron shut up. “I wasn’t kidding, it looks great. Like a home.”

Ron smiled. “Yeah, it is that.”

Harry found the summer to be pretty enjoyable. He played mini Quidditch games with the Weasleys, spent a large amount of time annoying the twins that he could float around without being detecting, helped the twins brainstorm prank ideas, and tested the properties of basilisk parts.

Basilisk blood seemed to enhance immunity to poisons. He'd dosed Wormtail with basilisk blood each day, and then force fed the rat various poisons, observed, then given him the antidote. The tests had proved rather clearly that the basilisks blood was quite helpful. Harry was planning trying basilisk venom on the rat eventually to see if he could withstand that, but had decided not to for now, since having a human lab-rat was useful, and there was a good chance it might prove fatal. Perhaps he should let the twins test things on him as well...

Basilisk skin seemed to be pretty hex resistant. Harry thought that perhaps he would have a few sets of robes, boots, cloaks, and gloves made from the stuff for dangerous situations, but that would have to wait until after he'd returned to Hogwarts, as he'd only brought small samples of blood and scales with him to the burrow.

The Weasley family seemed very grateful for Harry's presence. Another voice to fill the silence, additional company, a friend to be there when comfort was needed, to be the one to be brave and smile for the others, and a place at the table that wasn't empty. The twins had thrown themselves into their experiments, which were as much of a distraction as a hobby now. Padfoot spent a lot of time watching them, except when Harry was experimenting on Wormtail, which was his favorite show.

Life was easier when he was awake. Harry was well accustomed to focusing on the present from years of merely worrying about surviving the day, and had studying and experiments to throw himself into as well. He was fine- most of the time... while he was awake. His dreams were filled with footsteps of unseen danger, the body of a redheaded girl, the streets, running... and sometimes, every so often, a house burning behind him as he ran, the screams echoing... *please, leave me alone, just let me be warm, safe...* There had been a time once, *hadn't there?* when he might have longed for someone to

comfort him, keep him safe, be with him... but that was beyond both recall and comprehension now. But most of the time, when he was awake, he could keep focused on the present. He'd wake, curled up, heart pounding, wanting to *run* but then he'd calm himself.

He tried not to think of how he'd failed, of how, despite all his efforts, all he'd managed was... but that was what he was famous for, wasn't it? *It's a strange reason to be called savior, being what I am- a survivor.*

But tonight, the dreams didn't come. They were replaced by something else entirely.

The room was shabby and unfamiliar. There was a women standing there, looking at something in an armchair that Harry could not see.

"How are you, My Lord?"

"I'm growing stronger, Bellatrix, you've seen to that, though it took you long enough to find me," a harsh, high voice answered.

"I'm sorry, my Lord, for my incompetence."

"As the only ones to return to me, both you and your husband will be rewarded, not punished, although you will be rewarded the greater, being far more competent as well as the one to bring him here."

"Should we prepare to return to Britain soon?"

"No, it is best he not know, not yet. We'll conduct the ritual here, when I am strong enough, and then return after I have had time to further increase my power. We'll deal with Potter later, after we've dealt with him... but it is to our advantage to leave him alone for now. We'll strike when he least suspects it, and not even his allies will stop us..."

Harry was awakened, scar still burning, by a brown and gold long-eared owl knocking on the window of his room- the room which had been Ginny's. It seemed rather as if Molly expected to move in

permanently. He opened the window to let it in. It was carrying a cage with a box of owl treats inside it, and a note. It made a rather strange sight. He opened the note, and read:

Hey Potter,

*I had to read a history book to find out
your birthday, you prat! The cage and
the owl treats are for the owl, which is
for you. Her name is Harriet, Harry for
short, just to annoy and confuse the hell
out of you. I've already written Snape to
inform him that he has to let you bring
your third pet to Hogwarts, or I'll
have the twins prank him into oblivion.
You have no excuse not to write me
now. Ha! See you soon.*

-Tracey Davis

Harry set it aside, deciding to deal with the matter of his dream first. He grabbed a spare piece of parchment from his trunk and scribbled a quick note:

Dumbledore,

V planning rise back to power (old one, not R).

Not in Britain currently.

-HP

He was quite sure the notes lack of detail would thoroughly annoy Dumbledore, and so, satisfied with it, took it over to his owl.

“Harriet-“

She gave a hoot, which sounded distinctly like the word ‘who’ spoken in an unearthly voice, as it always did.

“*Harry*, Take this to Dumbledore,” he told the bird, glaring at her as he tied the note to her leg.

Several more owls soon arrived at Harry’s window, bringing a book of magical theory from Hermione, a book of advanced hexes from Nott, a guide to experimenting with and finding properties of plant and animal parts from Neville, and a poster from Dean which the boy had drawn, depicted Harry surrounded by Nott, Tracey, the twins, Neville, Padfoot, Hermione, and Dean himself, with Silas as the border. Harry hung this on the wall. Apparently all of his friends had been informed by Tracey that it was his birthday.

Walking down to go eat breakfast, he could see from the stairs that the table was empty. *Suspicious, or am I just paranoid?*

He shifted to invisibility and floated down the rest of the way.

“When is going to get down here?”

“Shh, I could have sworn I heard footsteps-“

“There’s no one there, look-“

He floated around, observing its semi-hidden occupants. The Weasleys, Hermione, Neville, Theodore, Dean, Tracey-

He floated over behind Tracey and gave her a slight shove.

She spun around. “What- who-“

He appeared floating cross-legged in midair, and exclaimed, “Surprise!”

She glared at him. “*You’re* supposed to be the one getting surprised, Potter. Must you break *all* the rules?”

“That’s what they’re for, isn’t it?”

He heard Hermione snort across the room.

“I’ll have Snape take points for this.” Tracey announced, *almost* convincingly solemn.

“From your own house?” Harry asked, raising an eyebrow. Hermione, the twins, and Nott were laughing.

“Hey, it was worth a try,” she muttered, grinning. “Happy birthday, Harry.”

Chapter Seventeen: Transcendence

“Four things come not back: the spoken word, the sped arrow, time passed, and the neglected opportunity.”

–Omar Idn Al-Halif

“Master, are you sure we should use the boy?”

“Do you doubt my judgment, Bellatrix?” hissed the cold, high voice.

“Of course not, Master, but wouldn’t it be easier-”

“This way has its advantages, *Lestrangle*, as well as the delicious irony.”

“Of course, forgive me, master. And what of the other?”

“We will deal with him later.”

It was burning. *Again*. The lightning scar- the thing that marked Harry for the world to identify- was red, swollen, and stinging like hell when he awoke, and danger was building. It always seemed that way, ever since he’d come to Hogwarts- but there really was no turning back now. Returning to Riddle Manor would be hardly wise, all things considered. Hogwarts was safest, and provided new means of protection to be learned. And the Burrow was safe enough, for now. Once he got back to Hogwarts, the basilisk blood would provide protection as well. Pettigrew had withstood the testing. No long-term side effects, no withdrawal, and the added resistance to poisons seemed to be permanent. *And, once we arrive, the rat will face the final test...* thought Harry with some satisfaction. Basilisk venom. Harry was unsure whether it would kill the rat, or simply render him back to normal vulnerability. If the later, Fred and George could always use a test subject...

He'd have to learn as many defenses as possible once he returned. Danger, always danger... not that he hadn't grown a bit used to it...

"HARRY! It's time to wake up, Harry dear, the train leaves at eleven and-" a voice called, interrupting his train of thought.

"I'm up, Mrs. Weasley!"

He dressed hurriedly in muggle clothes the Weasley's had lent him (his own were too small now, as well as being in tatters) and hurried downstairs for a hasty but thorough breakfast with the Weasleys. Mrs. Weasley was fussing over everyone even more than usual. There were tearstains on her cheeks, and both she and her husband had dark circles under their eyes. The rest of the table's occupants were unusually quiet and uneasy. Even Fred and George said very little except for 'good morning's and frequent offers to help out which seemed to only depress their mother more. It was much to Harry's relief when they all finally left the house and piled into the car.

They arrived to find the platform bustling with the usual crowd. Percy split off to join the prefects, leaving Harry, Ron, Fred, and George to look for Tracey, Nott, Neville, and Hermione. When they had finally managed that, the eight of them headed on to the train to look for a compartment.

"This one's empty!" pointed out Neville. "Well, almost..."

"He's hardly going to mind, he's *asleep*." Tracey sneered, opening the door of the compartment and walking inside.

"*Tracey...*" groaned Hermione, probably more at the girl's tone than anything; she didn't argue the point and followed Tracey into the compartment along with everyone else.

"Who d'you reckon he is?" Ron hissed as they sat down and slid the door shut.

"Professor R. J. Lupin," whispered Hermione at once.

"How d'you know that?"

"It's on his case," she replied, pointing to the luggage rack. Fred, George, and Tracey sniggered unsubtly. Ron tried to ignore them.

"Wonder what he teaches?" said Ron, frowning at Professor Lupin's pallid profile.

"That's obvious," whispered Hermione. *Lupin. Remus Lupin. That's Moony, then...* Padfoot was shifting uncomfortably at Harry's side, but he could see no way of leaving now without gathering suspicion. Only Ron knew who the dog was at the moment, and he had no interest in explaining this to the others. Anyway, the man was asleep, and with it being so close to the full moon, he was likely to sleep the whole way. "There's only one vacancy, isn't there? Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"Well, I hope he's up to it," said Ron doubtfully. "He looks like one good hex would finish him off, doesn't he?"

"Want to test it?" asked Tracey, a smirk playing across her lips.

Hermione glared fiercely at her.

"There will be *no hexing* in this compartment!"

"Cool it, Granger, it was all in jest. Why the concern, anyhow? I'm sure he's up to the job. Just as much as the last two were..."

Theodore snorted. "As if *that's* saying anything."

Hermione looked about to comment, but then the compartment door slid open, and the others went to investigate the food cart.

"D'you think we should wake him up?" Ron asked awkwardly, nodding toward Professor Lupin. "He looks like he could do with some food."

Hermione approached Professor Lupin cautiously.

"Er- Professor?" she said. "Excuse me- Professor?"

He didn't move.

“Don’t worry, dear,” said the witch with the trolley, “If he’s hungry when he wakes, I’ll be up front with the driver.” “I suppose he *is* sleep?” said Ron quietly as the witch slid the compartment door closed. “I mean- he hasn’t died, has he?”

“No, no, he’s breathing, whispered Hermione.

“Cut it out with the whispering, he’s obviously not about to wake up,” commented Tracey, rolling her eyes.

For the next few hours, the train ride remained uneventful. Then it stopped.

“What the hell?” exclaimed Tracey.

“What’s going on?” said Ron’s voice from behind Harry.

“Ouch!” gasped Hermione, “Ron, that was my foot!”

“We didn’t do it, really.” George commented.

“Unfortunately.” Fred added.

“D’you think we’ve broken down?” asked Neville nervously.

“Dunno...”

Only moments later, the compartment door opened. Standing in the doorway was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Harry did the first thing that came to mind, and *sensed*, focusing his awareness on his surroundings. Then the figure drew in a slow rattling breath. Cold swept over the compartment, and Harry knew without a doubt what it was. *Dementor*... He continued to focus on his surroundings as he stood to face it. There was a faint rush in his ears, and it was *cold*- He had to stay focused, not to let it control his consciousness... as he drew his wand, he concentrated briefly on Hogwarts, and on the people surrounding him. Then he opened his mouth and let the words spill out.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

Then there was a winged silver form bursting from his wand. The dementor turned and glided out of the compartment. Finally, the cold began to fade. Harry felt horribly drained.

"How did you learn that?" came a voice from behind him. Harry turned unsteadily to find Professor R. J. Lupin fully awake, watching him.

"I studied it last year, when I learned dementors would be guarding Hogwarts. They obviously still are. Anyhow, I've enough bad memories to find them a cause for concern."

Lupin nodded, watching him intently. "Sit down, Harry. You going to be alright?" Harry nodded. "Here," said Lupin, taking out a bar of chocolate and handing out chunks, the first to Harry, "it helps." Then he froze suddenly, staring at Padfoot.

"What is a dog doing here?"

"That would be my guard dog."

"That dog's not a safe--"

"I assure you, Professor, that Padfoot is doing a perfectly good job. I've no need to fill the position of guard-wolf as well." Lupin stared at him. "Let's have this conversation at a different time and place. Keep your mouth shut, and I'll explain everything that's going on. I assure you, I know what I'm doing."

"You're playing a dangerous game, Harry, he's not to be trusted, and there isn't always someone around to help you if--"

"There is, actually." Harry replied. "*Silas, come out please.*" Silas slithered out from under Harry's sleeve. Harry petted the snake absentmindedly, not taking his eyes off of Lupin.

"Immediately after the feast, then."

Harry nodded. "I'll see you then."

"I'll come." Ron spoke up.

“Very well.” Harry agreed. Lupin looked surprised, but nodded.

“What about the rest of us?” asked Tracey indignantly.

“Just Ron. He knows what we’re talking about.”

Tracey scowled. “And why don’t the rest of us?”

“You weren’t there.”

“Urgh. I guess I must have missed out on even more fun last year than I thought.”

Chapter Eighteen: Wolf, Dog, and Dementor

"Listen: there's a helleva good universe next door--let's go."

-E. E. Cummins

Azkaban prison was on an island, everyone knew that. Even its location wasn't hidden in the least. Dark gray rock rising sharply from the water, metal bars holding the prisoners in, a constant chill that was more in your mind than the air, and the screams... the screams as the prisoners let out the terror, the pain, and slowly but surely, their sanity. Thus it had been in every case, except that of Sirius Black.

Not that any of it bothered the guards, of course. The guards Azkaban caused a great deal of those unpleasant factors themselves. The guards of Azkaban were dementors- the *only* guards of Azkaban. Most of them were off chasing Black, but a few remained to tend to the prisoners, and a huge chunk guarded Hogwarts.

Sirius Black was the only man to ever have escaped Azkaban, after all, and the Ministry had had a very reliable tip off- Peter Pettigrew had told them the year before that Black was likely to head for Hogwarts. No one had seen Pettigrew for a while, but that didn't matter. He was probably just trying to keep from getting any attention from Black, or so Cornelius Fudge had assumed. No matter. It was imperative that Black be caught. The wizarding world's main threat needed to be dealt with.

Remus Lupin- an obstacle Harry had not expected to encounter this year- would not be easy to persuade. Nor was it likely that bringing up that they had Lupin's little *friend*, Peter Pettigrew, in captivity help their case. The best method of persuasion Harry could think of was simply to be as blunt and honest as possible- it was what Lupin would be the most likely to act favorably to. Ron's presence would only be helpful to that effect.

As the feast drew to a close, Tracey helpfully distracted the other slytherins by '*accidentally*' spilling a dish of pudding all over Draco Malfoy; Harry (accompanied by Silas and Padfoot, as always) slipped off unnoticed to follow Lupin out of the Great Hall. Over at the Gryffindor table, Ron Weasley rose and followed.

They followed Lupin up staircases and through corridors, finally arriving at an unfamiliar room- Lupin's office. The walls were blank, and furniture sparse; Lupin had had no time to so much as unpack yet. Padfoot stayed close to Harry, watching his former friend intently.

"You may take as long as you want to tell your story, but first, he needs to be bound," said Lupin in a determinedly calm voice, looking intently at Harry.

"I don't think-" Harry began, but Padfoot walked over to Lupin and lay down at his feet.

"Alright then, bind him."

"*Incarcerous!*" spelled Lupin tonelessly, avoiding looking at the dog. Moments later Padfoot was bound thoroughly in thick ropes. Harry made a mental note to remember the spell.

"Well, then?" Lupin asked, "I trust you have an explanation."

Harry looked up into the man's eyes. Lupin's expression seemed almost blank, empty... but echoes of pain and desperation had left their mark. Harry swallowed. This wasn't going to be easy. Sure, Lupin *wanted* to believe them, but he had a feeling that would only make the man harder to convince.

Harry took a deep breath, and began. Lupin listened with frightening intensity.

"I found him in Hogsmeade last year. He seemed rather overly friendly, and a bit too interested in me, and Silas," Harry gestured to the snake around his neck, "informed me immediately that he wasn't a dog. The only thing I could think of was that he must be an animagus. I thought it was likely that it was Black, and decided that whoever it was, I'd prefer to have him where I could keep an eye on

him. I assigned Silas to keep an eye on whenever I couldn't, such as while I slept."

Lupin, Padfoot, and Ron were all staring at him.

"You *knew* he was an animagus? Why-"

"If I'd announced the fact, Ronald, he'd have known that I knew. It is much easier to figure out a person's motives if they don't realize how much you know.

"He didn't try anything, however. Towards the end of the year, when Ron and I were investigating a source on the Chamber of Secrets and got into a spot of trouble, he transformed and helped."

Ron snorted. "Yeah, if you call being *surrounded by giant spiders* a spot of trouble. Though..." Ron's voice trailed off, and Harry could tell he was thinking about the basilisk, and probably what they'd found in the chamber as well.

"After getting out of the forest, Ron found a rat lurking around. I made a guess based on Black's reaction and stunned it. Pettigrew confessed to not only the murder of the twelve muggles but also the betrayal of my parents within seconds of being forced to transform to his normal shape."

"Where is Peter now? If you've hurt him-"

"Why so concerned? Tell me, Lupin, has Wormy been much of a friend these past few years?"

"He's been through a lot, nearly being murdered, then thinking you were killed, that was the last straw-"

"The last time he needed you for information, actually."

Lupin was staring at him, eyes wild. "You don't have nearly enough proof that-"

But then a silvery shape entered the room through the wall, heading for Lupin. A Patronus. It reached the man and dissolved. Lupin just

stood there for a moment, looking shocked, then said, “We’ll have to finish this later.”

“What is it, Professor?”

Lupin took a deep breath before answering. “There’s been a mass break-out from Azkaban.”

“W-what?” Ron stuttered. “How?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Weasley. Dumbledore assumes it was by Voldemort, the Death Eaters, or both, and orchestrated personally by Black, since he’s done it before, but... ...but in was within the last hour, and I’ve had my eyes on him the entire time.”

With that, Hogwarts’s newest professor swept from the room.

Chapter Nineteen: Darkness Rising

The proper teaching is recognized with ease. You can know it without fail because it awakens within you that sensations which tells you this is something you've always known.

-Frank Herbert

The news was in the papers the next morning. Azkaban, the supposedly impenetrable fortress, had had not just one this time, but some thirty prisoners broken out, some former death eaters, others just common criminals *who likely gave their loyalties in exchange for their freedom...* Most students were oblivious. Some were shocked and horrified. A couple dozen of them, however, for various reasons, were not shocked at all. *How many are the children of Death Eaters, and how many the children of ministry workers?*

Harry hadn't told anyone what he'd learned before, and had instructed Ron to stay silent as well. He looked around now to take note of who had known. Down the table, Malfoy was acting like king of the world. Parkinson, Zabini, Crabbe, Goyle, Bulstrode... they had all known. So had some of the older students, and a scattered number of students in other houses. And so had Theodore Nott, who now calmly met Harry's gaze. Yes, of course Nott knew. There was no exclamation, no argument, no question. They would continue for now as they always had, but there would be little trust there. Harry would see where the dividing line fell when the time came, and they would maintain at least surface ties until then.

Near by, a familiar face looked up from yet another copy of the *Daily Prophet*, looked around, then turned to glare at the both of them.

"How come no one ever tells anything?" exclaimed an annoyed Tracey Davis.

At least *her* attitude hadn't changed. It was almost comforting. Almost.

"I'm sure your teacher's will be distressed to hear you haven't noticed their efforts," Nott informed her solemnly.

"Don't be silly, Nott, I'm sure they've already realized. Pass the toast already."

Harry laughed in surprise. *Everything's alright, really... for the moment...* Yet somehow it seemed he could almost feel the time running through his fingers, sand through an hourglass... and his heart beat seemed to be chanting over and over; *time's running short, time's running short, time's running short... time's running out...* and he knew, even before he collapsed into the blankets to sleep that his dreams wouldn't be pleasant. There would be a little red-haired girl lying dead on the floor, and a little boy starving on the streets, and there would be a fire burning at Number 4, Privet Drive, while a child ran and ran *run away as fast as you can, and don't look back because- because... time's running out.*

Harry Potter hated fear. He hated foreboding. He hated feeling lost. Most of all, he hated feeling like he cared. He forced himself to climb out of bed. It was the first day of classes, and it was time to get it together. He focused The Sense around him. It was calming, and it informed him immediately that he was the only one awake. Keeping The Focus on, he walked up the stairs to the Slytherin common room. It was there Theodore Nott found him several minutes later, curled up with a book on hexes.

"There you are. Up early, as usual." The boy glanced at the book Harry was reading, one he'd given him for Christmas the year before. "Pity Lockhart never did teach us much about dueling. What would you say to a practice duel now? I'm feeling a bit restless. Harry nodded and got to his feet.

The spells flew. Harry quickly fell into a rhythm, assessing his opponent's abilities, blocking, dodging, sending off some spells. When he saw changes to get spells through, he sent ones that would not end the duel- *tarantella*, which forced Nott's feet into a crazy jig, the trip jinx, the twitchy ear hex... keeping the duel going, and gaining as much practice as possible dodging, shielding, and predicting

another's attacks. The Sense was surprisingly helpful. Not only did Harry find calm awareness a good mindset, but also it allowed him to be more rapidly aware of the subtle movements which might signal an attack. It would take practice for this particular skill to be of any use against the rapid pace of an expert dueler, of course, but it might one day be a great help.

Someone was coming down the stairs behind Nott, who hadn't seemed to have noticed yet. Harry kept his eyes calmly on the other boy, dodging a spell and then-

"Petrificus Totalus!" murmured a voice firmly from behind Nott, who was taken by surprise.

Tracey Davis stepped calmly over the boy. "I'd like to go to breakfast now," she announced as if she hadn't just hexed someone. "Come on Potter, Nott."

"Finite Incantantum." Harry muttered.

"I guess that's it for now, then," commented Theodore, "up for another duel tomorrow?"

"You're on."

Defense Against the Dark Arts was always one of the most anticipated classes... among the first years. Everyone else had long ago become accustomed to disappointment. The third year slytherins showed little interest upon entering the classroom, which was still empty. They filed into their seats and sat down. Some students-Zabini, Crabbe, Goyle, Greengrass, Parkinson, and Bulstrode- took out books and quills. The remaining few sat back and watched the door. When Lupin entered the room, he found all eyes watching him intently.

"Good afternoon," he said. "Would you please put all your books back in your bags. Today's will be a practical lesson. You will need only your wands."

"That and a new teacher, charity case," mutter Malfoy, then yelped. Harry looked over and saw Padfoot's jaws had gotten a hold on Malfoy's foot. Lupin was staring at the dog, seemingly torn between smiling and scolding. It seemed they were well on the way to convincing him.

"Can't you even control your own dog, Potter?" growled Malfoy.

"What dog? I don't see any dog," Harry replied, "What is it, the grim?"

Malfoy paled for a moment, then glared. "That's *not funny*, Potter."

"I beg to differ, Malfoy," said Tracey, grinning nastily. "That's a good dog. You can come back now, you can always bite him later if he misbehaves." Padfoot trotted over to be petted, wagging his tail. "Such a genius dog you've got, Potter."

"Right then," said Professor Lupin, "If you'd follow me."

The class got to its feet and followed Professor Lupin out of the classroom. He led them along the deserted corridor and around a corner to the staffroom. It was a long, paneled room full of old, mismatched chairs. Lupin beckoned the class to the end of the room, where there was nothing but an old wardrobe. As Professor Lupin went to stand next to it, the wardrobe gave a sudden wobble, banging off the wall.

"Nothing to worry about," said Professor Lupin calmly. "There's a boggart in there. Boggarts like dark, enclosed spaces," said Professor Lupin. Wardrobes, the gap beneath beds, the cupboards under sinks- I've even met one that had lodged itself in a grandfather clock.

"So, the first quest we must ask ourselves is, what *is* a boggart?"

When no one else volunteered, Nott raised his hand lazily.

"It's a shape-shifter that aims to frighten."

"Correct," said Professor Lupin. "So the boggart sitting in the darkness within has not yet assumed a form. He does not yet know what will frighten the person on the other side of the door. Nobody

knows what a boggart looks like when he is alone, but when I let him out, he will immediately become whatever each of us most fears.

"This means that we have a huge advantage over the boggart before we begin. Have you spotted it, Harry?"

Harry studied the man carefully, startled by the sudden attention.

"It wouldn't know what shape it should be, because there are so many of us."

"Precisely. It's always best to have company when you're dealing with a boggart. He becomes confused. The charm that repels a boggart is simple, yet it requires force of mind. You see, the thing that really finishes a boggart is *laughter*. What you need to do is force it to assume a shape that you find amusing.

"We will practice the charm without wands first. After me, please...*riddikulus!*"

"This *class* is ridiculous." Malfoy muttered from the back of the class.

"We'll each face the boggart in turn," said Professor Lupin. "I would like all of you to take a moment now to think of the thing that scares you most, and imagine how you might force it to look comical. Mr. Malfoy, you'll be going first."

Malfoy looked much less confident now, but not wanting to lose face in front of his peers, he stepped up to the front.

"On the count of three, Mr. Malfoy," said Professor Lupin, who was pointing his wand at the handle of the wardrobe. "One- two- three- *now!*"

The wardrobe burst open. At first, it was a banshee, then it shifted to the form of a giant spectral dog- the grim. Harry was sure Tracey would find ways to use that one.

"*Riddikulus!*" Malfoy shouted. Then the specter's head fell to the ground. The body fell next to it, and there was a pool of blood on the floor. A few of Malfoy's cronies laughed, but not Malfoy himself. The

blond boy had gone even paler, and then he hurried to the back of the room. The next student stepped up, and the boggart changed again. At the back of the group, Malfoy's face relaxed in relief.

Only a few of the students boggarts were as memorable as Malfoy's. Pansy Parkinson's boggart was Tracey herself. As Parkinson raised her wand to use the charm, she was hit with a hex from behind, and dropped her wand. She hurried to pick it up and run to the back of the room. Beside Harry, the real Tracey was smirking. Nott raised a hand to high five her. Lupin looked as though he was about to say something, but then Tracey stepped forward.

For a brief moment, two Traceys stood facing each other. Then the boggart shifted. It was a lethifold.

Tracey stared at it for a moment, then raised her wand.

"Expecto Patronum!" It was not corporal, but it was enough to force the boggart back a little ways.

Only Harry and Theodore were left now. Harry was next in line. He started to step forward. Padfoot went up with him, but Lupin stepped between Harry and the boggart- but Padfoot was closer than them both.

Crack! There was a dead Harry-boggart lying on the floor. Then Crack! A dead Lupin-boggart. Then- Harry stepped around Lupin, who was watching the dog, and took his place before the boggart.

There was a rattled breath from under a dark hood, and then a deep cold filled the room. Harry anchored himself with the Sense, then took a deep breath and cast the patronus. A silver hawk flew from his wand, driving the boggart-dementor back into the wardrobe. Lupin used a hasty incantation to shut the doors behind it.

"That'll be it for today, class. Homework, kindly read the chapter on boggarts and summarize it for me... to be handed in on Monday. Harry, could you please stay behind for a moment?"

Harry nodded and sat down in an armchair while the rest of the class filed out of the room. When Lupin spoke, however, it was not to Harry.

He turned to Padfoot, kneeling down to pet the dog's head, and whispered:

"I'm sorry for doubting you, old friend."

Chapter Twenty: Foreboding

Harry nodded and sat down in an armchair while the rest of the class filed out of the room. When Lupin spoke, however, it was not to Harry. He turned to Padfoot, kneeling down to pet the dog's head, and whispered:

"I'm sorry for doubting you, old friend."

Padfoot literally bowled Lupin over, licking his face in a typical dog greeting.

"Padfoot!" Lupin shoved the 'dog' off him, but he was smiling. "Harry, I don't suppose- well, the staffroom's hardly a safe place for him to transform, and unfortunately I have a class to teach- what would you think of arranging some way for the two of you to come and visit me regularly?"

"It sounds good to me, Professor. I could say you were giving me extra defense lessons."

"That might not be entirely convincing, Harry..."

"If the two of you actually give me extra defense lessons when we meet, then it will be."

Lupin stared at Harry for a moment, then nodded. "How would Friday, after classes, be? I could have some food brought up from the kitchens, and we could have a dinner break up here as well."

"It's good with me. I'd better be getting to class. See you later, Professor."

Since the breakout, tension and nervousness spread like wildfire. Within Slytherin house- was it in his imagination, or was everyone now acting more distant and formal, interaction becoming careful

ritual, and not a word spoken that wasn't analyzed with precision.
Change is coming.

The morning duels with Nott continued, and learning new spells was rising rapidly in priority for everyone in Slytherin house. Even the usually reluctant-to-do-extra-work Tracey Davis was rarely seen without a book of hexes and curses. Classes, studying, sleep, dueling, classes...

And then one day as the twins, Ron, Neville, Dean, Nott, Tracey, Harry, and Hermione sat together in the library... Hermione shut her book.

"Enough of this. Let's go flying."

"Hermione!" exclaimed George, "why'd you say that? You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"That was the point."

"Good going, Granger. C'mon, let's get out of here!" Tracey exclaimed, smirking, as she got to her feet.

It'd be good to have the variation, Harry thought, but then again the atmosphere wouldn't really change for long. *But then, I don't have to stay forever anyway. It was only last term I was bound to, and as long as I don't go to the manor... and I could always come back, when it's time... it isn't that safe here anymore, anyway.*

When Friday rolled around, Harry and Padfoot made their way up to Lupin's rooms. Lupin quickly ushered them inside, and as soon as the door was shut, Black transformed.

"Hello, Moony!"

"It's good to see you again, Padfoot. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course, if you'll forgive me for having thought you the traitor, before."

“Done.”

Black stepped forward and gave Lupin a hug, then they turned to Harry.

“Alright, now Harry, I’ve come up with a list of basic spells and blocks that can be useful in duels, in order of difficulty. We’ll practice having you cast and block these, but also.... One of the most important skills in dueling and self defense is the ability to catch your opponent by surprise. Creating your own spells so that others won’t know them is a good thing to aim for eventually, but even simply distracting the person can be extremely effective. That will be one of the main things I plan to work on teaching you.” Lupin explained.

“You see, Harry, you may not think that turning your opponents wand into a rubber chicken is a good dueling strategy, but,” Sirius added, nodding solemnly, “it is.”

Harry made a mental note to discuss distractions to be used in dueling with the twins.

Spending time with Black and Lupin was fun its own way, but over dinner they spent enough time reminiscing to get on his nerves. Harry had long since become accustomed to having no parents looking after him, and having learned to focus on survival, and the present, had a lack of desire to hear about dead people he didn’t remember and to whom he couldn’t relate. Little golden brats of Hogwarts to whom everything had been handed, from Black and Lupin’s descriptions, not to mention a bully, in the case of James.

Nevertheless, Lupin’s teaching style, combined with Blacks, was bound to teach him things that would come in handy.

“Master, have you seen the papers? He’s been-“

“It doesn’t matter, Bellatrix. If he scares them, all the better. Let him do as he pleases. It amuses me.”

“But what if he messes up, ruins everything-“

“He won’t. No one knows our plans, and no one can thwart them. Don’t concern yourself. You needn’t attend to anything, except getting me strong enough so that I will be ready, when it’s time.”

“Of course, Master.”

“Now where is Nagini? She needs to be milked. I’m hungry...”

Interlude: Wizarding News

The Daily Prophet- September 3

AZKABAN INVESTIGATION UNVEILED

On investigation of the Azkaban breakout, this reporter has discovered that prisoners are not the only things to have gone missing over night. The Azkaban guards themselves seem to have gone missing.

One of the aurors investigating the scene remarked, "I don't like the idea of the dementors wandering around unsupervised with no one knowing where they are much more than I like the idea of the convicts being loose."

The only official statement released by the Ministry is one from Minister Fudge: "We think that Black may be responsible." But if one man could thwart the ministry this far in one of it's 'most secure' facilities, can we really have any faith in it with so many hazards now loose?

This reporter would advise readers not to go out after dark, and to stay away from deserted areas.

-Daily Prophet correspondent

Rita Skeeter

The Quibbler- September 3

MINISTRY	USING	BREAKOUT	STORY
TO COVERUP	MASS EXECUTIONS		

We all have heard that power corrupts, but even we at the Quibbler had not dreamed the ministry would go so far. Then we heard yesterday's news, and we knew.

There is no way all those people could have just disappeared. The ministry is obviously trying to cover up mass illegal executions.

The question now is, *were these people ever guilty at all, or is the ministry just killing everyone that gets in its way?*

We'll be sure to tell you when we find out more.

Daily Prophet- September 7

MASS WEREWOLF ATTACKS

Last night, werewolf attacks were reported all over the country, the worst of these being an attack on a wizarding primary school where the children were having a sleep over party. Three teachers and ten children were found dead from that one attack alone, and the remaining nine were all injured. The injuries may heal, but the effects will remain- they will be werewolves for the rest of their lives. It is as of yet unknown what will be done with them.

The one question we must all ask is whether last night's attacks have something to do with the escaped murderers. This reporter finds it difficult to believe otherwise.

Harry Potter had made his decision. He would go into the forest. Hogwarts life was very different from all he had known. He longed for independence, wildness, trials. He'd read of an intriguing type of magic- the animagus transformation- and the forest would help him with that. Time to practice new magic, and a place to test his survival skills... He collected a bag of blankets, some food from the kitchens, and several bottles of water, and then snuck out of Hogwarts, invisible.

"The plan has changed."

"My Lord?" Bellatrix inquired.

"We will go through with the preliminary ritual first. It will make it easier to deal with the boy."

"Then we are to travel soon."

"Yes. The present situation suits our purposes."

The forest was beautiful, in a dangerous sort of way. Huge trees looming, ground carpeted in moss and fallen leaves, the air full of the smell of plants and the tingle of magic, and never entirely silent, the whole forest rich with vales of shadow, mingled intermittently with dappled patches of light that sifted through the deep green canopy above.

After a long day of wandering Harry found a small space sheltered by a large tree and a cropping of rock. He crawled inside. It would have to do. He would have to practice basic protective spells on his shelter before anything else.

It was several days before Harry ventured far from his little shelter. It now had some basic magical defenses around it. He couldn't be seen, and his aura couldn't be sensed, but that wouldn't keep him from detection, not here. Harry had also managed to cast most of the spells he'd learned at Hogwarts wandlessly. It was time for other things now.

The forest was dangerous, of course, but for the moment that was the point. There were more dangerous things in the world than anything that could be found here, and a trial here might help him survive later. So he journeyed deeper, running through the forest. Soon after, he realized he was being followed.

Spiders. *Lots* of spiders. Acromantulas, to be precise. He'd entered their territory.

He continued to run, allowing himself to float slightly above the ground, flapping his arms up and down behind him. He'd have felt ridiculous if not for the feeling of urgency. He focused on the *need* to escape. Survival was, after all, the rule he'd always lived by. Then he was rising higher, the flapping of his arms- no- *wings* lifting him rapidly above the spiders. It was done. He flew back to camp to rest, not knowing the surprise that awaited him.

The boy stood in a graveyard, clutching a phoenix feather wand. He met the red eyes of the man before him, trying with difficulty to hide his surprise and fear.

For a moment there was silence apart from the wind whistling through gravestones, ruffling the boy's already messy raven hair.

"Silly little *fool*," the man hissed, "not even your *allies* will help you now."

In one movement, the man swept an arm forward. He sliced into the boy's arm with a knife he had concealed beneath his sleeve, and then proceeded to spell the blood that spilled forth into a conjured goblet and drank deeply. The boy stumbled backwards.

A lightning shaped scar was burning.

"Your blood adds to my strength, boy, but you have outlived your usefulness."

You won't kill me," the boy replied with almost-convincing bravado.

The man laughed high and cold. The boy spun around and began to run.

“Avada Kedevera!”

There was a flash of green light, and the boy fell to the ground. None of those in the circle around them had made any move to interfere. Now... :

“My Lord?”

“Riddle has served his purpose.”

“Yes, milord.”

Many miles away, Harry Potter awoke and got to his feet, scar burning, and prepared to return to the school called Hogwarts. It was time.

A/N: This is, to be honest, the end of this fic. I've been dividing them more by events than by school years. There might or might not be an epilogue, I haven't decided. There will be a sequel, but I plan to wait until I have a chunk of it written before starting to post it. If you just have me on author alert, you can request and I'll email you when it's up, or you can join the yahoo group from the link on my profile to be alerted when the sequel is posted.